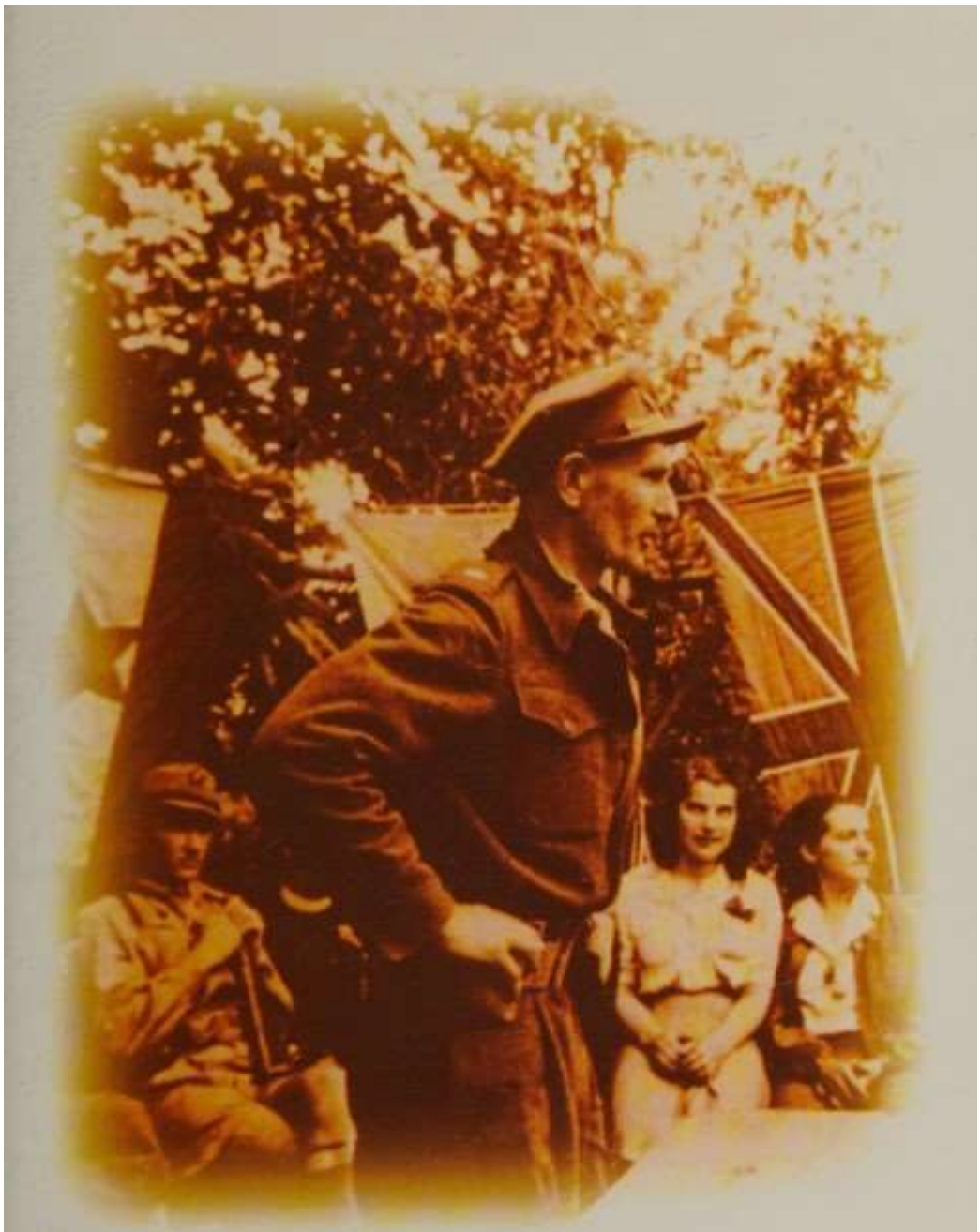

THE PRICE OF PATRIOTISM

JOHN EARLE

Set up by Churchill in 1940 after the fall of France, Special Operations Executive (SOE) was a secret organisation whose aim was to promote resistance in German-occupied Europe.

SOE's activities in countries such as France are well-known. Less familiar are their heroic, sometimes foolhardy, exploits behind the enemy lines in Slovenia, northernmost republic of Yugoslavia. John Earle, a member of SOE, was parachuted into Yugoslavia as a British Liaison Officer (BLO), with a brief to help local Partizans combat the Axis domination in every way possible.

Not all the missions are successful, and not all the characters are noble. The author, who lives today near the scene of these exploits, investigates the fate of the participants and uncovers an unknown corner of history that is vital in understanding the troubled course of events both before and after the Second World War.

* * *

„Though the British headquarters of the Middle East in Cairo pullulated with rumours and gossip of all kinds about occupied Europe, little accurate information was available about the strength and potential effectiveness of resistance movements in Slovenia. SOE had been toying ever since 1942 with the idea of infiltrating agents...”

* * *

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John Earle

The Price of Patriotism

THE PRICE OF PATRIOTISM

SOE and M16 in the Italian – Slovene Borderlands During World War II

John Earle

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Thy Friendship oft has made my heart to ake.
Do be my Enemy for Friendships sake.

William Blake

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PREFACE

The speeches in the fiftieth anniversary commemoration were over and people began drifting away, in dribs and drabs, to the next event on the programme. This required a short, uphill walk to a gully in a forest that was peaceful and romantic as in an old-fashioned fairy tale. We were in hilly country near Vojsko in western Slovenia, far – for who knows how long? – from the flows of tourism. In a half-hidden hut of local timber, a simple printing press had been reassembled to churn out and offer to today's visitors facsimile copies of the first issue of *Partizanski Dnevnik*. Here in 1943 it had been born as a daily newspaper, or rather newssheet, of the Slovene resistance movement in this corner of Nazi and Fascist occupied Europe.

Unthinkingly I tagged on behind a gaggle of strangers ambling up a slope. There was a tap on my shoulder. „Mister“, a voice behind me said in English, „you are going the wrong way“. I was mistakenly following a group who had decided to leave early and were making their way to a clearing where they had left their cars.

The voice was that of Ivo Božič. He introduced himself and said he had been trained by SOE and arrived here by parachute during the war. It was an area of great strategic importance; apparently remote from so-called centres of civilisation, yet only a gunshot away from the Axis' lines of communication between their forces in north Italy and their bases in Austria, then part of the German Reich. Now, in 1993, the Communist regime in Yugoslavia had adventures and fate had lain buried, officially ignored and unrecorded during the years of Yugoslavia – one of the last unsolved mysteries from the Second World War. Even less had the English speaking public been told about the British who came by parachute to support the resistance.

Veterans' talk exploits in years gone by cannot always be taken at its face value. It so happened that at this time I was researching my own forgotten activities in wartime Serbia on visits to the Public Record Office, now the National Archive, at Kew; so I took the opportunity of looking for corroboration in its files on the Slovenes. And there they were, Ivo Božić, of SOE mission Livingstone One, and others of his comrades too.

The quantity of books describing events in the Second World War is already more than enough. At the risk however of further inflating the number, this was a story that needed to be told. The events had lain too long hidden behind a curtain. The memory of the actors who perished deserves to be honoured.

It would none the less be quite out of place to relate these events to situations today. They are past history. In our western world of which Slovenia forms part there is a tendency, justified in itself, to re-examine and question what happened in the past. In so doing, however, it is not uncommon that people had their motives, war brings cruelty and injustice, but at the same time there was powerful idealism and faith in a more just society such as is rarely found in public life today.

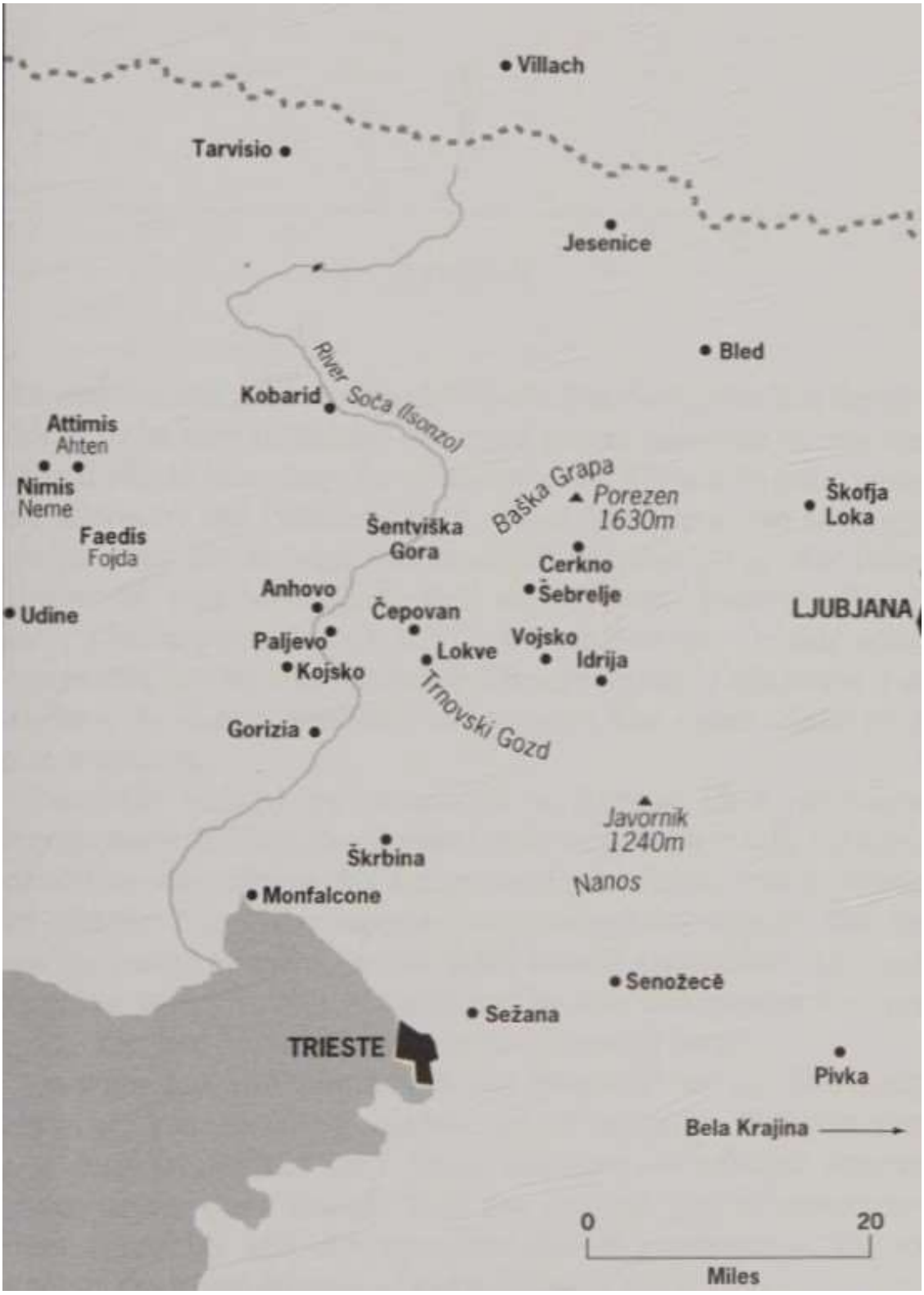
* * *

This work would not have seen the light of day but for the invaluable support of Ivo Jevnikar in arranging meetings, supplying material and offering the fruits of his own research as a local historian and public figure in the Slovene minority in Italy. It was of enormous advantage to be able speak with survivors from the war, notably Ivo Božić, Stanko Simčič, Ciril Kobal and the late Cvetko Šuligoj, and with relatives and families of some of those who have died. Emil Švara Komen, himself a Nazi deportee, has done much to encourage public recognition of the role of the Western Allies. Dr Boris Mlakar and the late Prof Ferenc of the Slovene Institute of Modern History, as well as the late general Lado Ambrožič – Novljan were among those who allowed me to draw on their knowledge and experience. Staff at the National Archive in Kew and the Slovene government archive in Ljubljana were particularly courteous and helpful in facilitating access to their files and allowing material to be reproduced. On the British side Duncan Stuart, till recently SOE Adviser to the Foreign Office, kindly read the text in draft and offered suggestions, as did David Lloyd, former British Ambassador to Slovenia, and Nicholas Moore, erstwhile colleague at Reuters. Dr Dušan Biber, Slovene historian of the war, looked through everything with a strict and corrective eye. To all of them we owe warm appreciation and thanks.

* * *

A word on Slovene pronunciation. The letter Č is sounded as English TS in tsar. J as Y in yet. Č as CH in church. Š as SH in ship. Ž as S in measure. The Serbo-Croat Ć is like CH in church, only slightly softer.

The Northern Adriatic showing the pre-war frontier between Italy and Jugoslavia (Slovenia)



Partizan IX Corps' area of operation north of Trieste

1.
Arrivals

The instructions given to Major Neville Darewski, the first British officer to be sent to enemy-occupied Italian Slovenia during the Second World War, were twofold and clear. He was to coordinate operations by the Partizans with Allied Mediterranean strategy; and he was „to arrange essential air supplies“. For the latter purpose he was particularly well suited, being from the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC), the unit in the British army responsible for the commissariat. Though he could not know it at the time, the supply problem was to loom like a dark cloud over his assignment.

Darewski arrived by parachute in August 1943, mid-way through the war. From the physical point of view he might not have seemed an ideal choice; his figure, for a parachutist, was anything but athletic. Surviving reports and photographs suggest that he was distinctly paunchy, while thick-lensed spectacles indicated imperfect eyesight. But in character he was communicative, yet diplomatic, and he had a gift for getting on with people.

On what day, and with whom, did Darewski arrive? The exact date is unclear; so is the composition of is party. These should have been straightforward facts, recorded in official reports written at the time; instead they are just the first of numerous minor mysteries and discrepancies that face anyone trying to establish the micro-history of those days.

His party jumped from a RAF Liberator bomber in bright moonlight between 1:30 and 2:00 a.m. on 13th August, according to his report written after his subsequent evacuation to Italy. But Slovenes who were with him and were still alive in the 1990s say that it was in the early hours of the 14th. Darewski himself is long since dead and thus unavailable to clear this up.

The group was from SOE, Special Operations Executive, the secret organisation conceived in March 1939 when the war clouds were gathering, and set up in July 1940 after the fall of France, to promote resistance in occupied Europe. Britain then stood alone. Much has been written about SOE, some of it in a decidedly romantic hue. In Churchill's oft quoted phrase, it was to „set Europe ablaze“. Its agents were described in terms later used for James Bond. At this stage of the war, however, the tasks of its officers with the Jugoslav Partizans were essentially those of a military mission, assisting with supplies, exchange of intelligence, coordination of tactics and so on.

Darewski’s mission bore the code name (from its signals plan) Livingstone II; it had been preceded by Livingstone I, manned by Italo-Slovenes, so called because they were ethnic Slovenes but Italian citizens. Who were the others with Darewski? He named them as Signalman Frank Hammond, his British radio operator, and a certain Sergeant Smirke, identified only as a Canadian Slovene. But Cvetko Šuligoj, one of the SOE-trained Italo-Slovenes, is positive that he travelled in the same plane as Darewski, along with Valter Gorjanc, another Italo-Slovene who was later killed in action.

The ethnic Slovenes, trained either by SOE or MI6, play an important part in these events. Most had been called up for service in the Italian forces and were sent to the Western Desert front in North Africa, where they were taken prisoner or deserted, and volunteered to the British for work behind the lines in their home country. While a few were infiltrated to the coast by sea, most were dropped in the interior by parachute – hence they were known among their compatriots as *padalci* or parachutists.

Šuligoj's version is backed by survivors from the party that Received them. On the other hand, no one remembers Smirke and Darewski does not mention him further in his narrative. It looks as if Darewski, who did not speak Slovene, did not really know who was travelling with him besides his fellow countryman, Hammond.

The members of Livingstone II touched ground on the slopes of Javornik, a 1.200-metre-high mountain about 35 kilometres (as the crow flies) north-north-east of the port of Trieste. The group was lucky. Unlike many SOE missions, which made repeated unsuccessful attempts because of bad weather or failure in reception arrangements, it got in first time. Stanko Simčič, one of the *padalci* who had arrived with Livingstone I, flashed from the ground the torch signals to the pilot that complemented the agreed pattern of fires. People, radio equipment and stores all arrived safely.

The area, now in Slovenia, was then in Italy; it was in territory of the Austro-Hungarian empire ceded to Italy after the First World War. Italian forces were not far distant. Darewski and his escort had to be on the move straight away.

Marching by night, their Partizan guides led the group in an arc round to the west and then south, crossing a fertile valley, as far as the village of Senožeče (Senosecchia in Italian) barely 30 kilometres from Trieste. On one of these night marches, after going without food all day, Simčič relates that they were to halt at a friendly house where they were to get a meal. Instead, they were greeted with, *„Chi va là?"* After a brief exchange of fire with an Italian patrol, they had to run for it. But, as soon as they were in safety, Simčič noticed that the heavier baggage had been left behind. Creeping back to retrieve it, he heard phrases like, *„Guarda! Che belle valigie"* – „Look! What lovely suitcases!" The radios, weighing some 25 kilogrammes in those days, were contained in suitcases, which SOE thought would help its agents to avoid detection in occupied Europe; in towns perhaps, but hardly appropriate in peasant society, where wicker baskets and knapsacks had not yet been superseded by plastic bags. So Simčič, Šuligoj, the operator Hammond and two Partizans mounted a small counter-attack, firing from the hip as they went in. The balance was: an Italian patrol put to flight, the mission's radios retrieved and no dinner.

Life in those early days was, as Darewski put it, „on rather a cloak and dagger basis". They usually moved every other night, for eight to ten hours at a time; appointments to meet people would be made at midnight or after; smoke for fires had to be kept to a minimum. He observed – typical RAOC officer – that „no arrangements were ever made for feeding at halts, carrying of rations, etc."

His RAOC background is also reflected in the care if not meticulousness with which he listed the stores and equipment that a British Liaison Office (BLO) should take with him. He

added to his report an appendix of no less than four foolscap pages detailing items of clothing. personal kit, weapons and medical kit that he had brought, together with his comments on the suitability of standard items for a BLO in a situation such as this. Another appendix, equally detailed, lists the prices. when he later passed through Croatia on his way out for evacuation, in Italian lire and kuna (the Croatian currency) of over 60 items of foodstuffs, clothing and consumer goods.

Included in Darewski's kit were 500.000 Italian lire and 225 gold sovereigns. Half a million lire was no mean sum in those days, for it had been Mussolini's policy till the war to keep the lira exchange rate at around 90 to the pound sterling. BLOs came supplied with funds – usually cash and some gold coin – for eventualities such as purchasing food if necessary or buying their way out of a tight corner; one in Serbia solved a problem of acute toothache by finding a local dentist who after extraction melted down a coin and inserted a gold tooth. But the lesson had been learnt and the funds were scaled down after a Major Terence Atherton was murdered in Bosnia in April or May 1942 by a local Četnik commander for the booty; he had been supplied with one million lire and nearly 2.000 gold sovereigns.

As the name suggests, Darewski was of Polish-Jewish origin. He wrote fluent English, which was evidently his mother tongue, and was a fully-fledged member of the British armed forces. All the same, he did not give the impression to Slovenes who met him of being a typical specimen of the British officer class.

For those first few weeks a feeling of disenchantment can be discerned in Darewski's report. Before leaving he had been led to expect that his hosts would be a strong force of 2.000 Partizans. Instead he dropped among a so-called „battalion", consisting of only 100 men commanded by a 20-year-old youngster who went by the name of Comrade Tovor. Darewski soon concluded that the Primorje or Primorska – the coast or coastal area in Slovene, mostly lying in what the Italians called Venezia Giulia – was being treated by the Partizans as a reservoir for obtaining recruits but not as an area for fighting in.

In fact the information given to Darewski before his arrival had not been so inaccurate. There had been two Partizan brigades in the Primorska. But, according to a history of IX Corps – the Partizan formation that was later set up – the Italians had increased the strengths of their troops in the area, and for this and other reasons most of the Partizan forces had been ordered by HQ Slovenia to move into Slovenia proper, where they were reformed as the so-called Gradnikova Brigade. In the Primorska there only remained a weak grouping which, under an order dated 1 August 1943, was formed as the Primorski *odred* or detachment.

Cairo, Darewski thought, had sent in altogether too many people and too much communications equipment to support forces so thin on the ground. There were not only his group from SOE but also some teams from ISLD – Inter Services Liaison Department, the cover name for MI6 in this theatre of war – about whom he had not been informed and only learnt about incidentally from the Partizans. It was difficult to find enough people to carry the radios and bulky ancillary equipment, including accumulators, charging engines, petrol for the latter, etc.

The SOE parties had been provided with several radio transmitters, each with its own ciphers; Crayon and Tennyson, as well as those for Livingstone I and Livingstone II. But they could not all be operated; the code book for one set had been lost during a march; and the crystals – then an essential piece of w/t equipment – of another had been damaged.

So, while at Senožeče, Darewski decided on simplification. As long as he remained there he was in any case fortunate in being able to work a transmitter off the village electricity mains. He had all unneeded sets buried – for retrieval if and when required later on – and told Cairo he was using only the set and code of Crayon. In fact Crayon was to remain the name of the mission with the Partizans of this area till the end of the war. The Italo-Slovene *padalci* with him, who had been trained by SOE in Egypt and Palestine for demolition and intelligence work as well as for radio communication, were put out on sabotage tasks.

* * *

Life in the woods or in scattered houses changed overnight after 8 September 1943 when an armistice was announced between Italy and the Western Allies; Italy had in reality surrendered. Mussolini and Fascism had fallen in the previous July and Italy had since then been governed by Marshal Badoglio in the name of King Victor Emmanuel. The Italian forces were thus no longer enemies of the Western Allies. Could they be persuaded to fight against the Germans? Here was a chance that should not be missed. But, as elsewhere in Italy and the Mediterranean, confusion reigned.

This was a moment when Darewski felt able to make a valuable contribution to the local war effort. In a first transport of enthusiasm after the news of the surrender, he had signalled to Cairo suggesting that even the important Adriatic port of Trieste would now lie open to capture by Allied airborne troops. But such an operation could obviously not be mounted at short notice and the Partizans he was with set their sights on the more modest objective of Gorizia. Lying to his west, where the Sota or Isonzo River debouches from the mountains, Gorizia with its 30.000 inhabitants of mixed population, was none the less an important centre; being *capoluogo di provincia* or county town. Before the First World War its mild climate had earned it the name of the „Austrian Nice“ and made it a popular place for elderly people to retire to.

Gorizia was the seat of an Italian military headquarters under a general. Though Darewski did not name him, he is referred to in Slovene documents as General Bruno Malagutti, commanding Torino infantry division. The Partizans sent messages and emissaries to him, to try to persuade him and his troops to join them in fighting the Germans; but to no avail. One such emissary was Simčič, who says he found the general's door closed. Instead, he was referred to the commander of the carabinieri or gendarmerie; the furthest the latter would go was to order the liberation of political and anti-fascist prisoners from the town jail.

Perhaps a British officer might have more success? This appears to have been an idea hatched up together with Aleš Bebler, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War in whom a leg wound

had left a permanent limp; he was a leading Partizan political representative in the area and after the war was to become deputy foreign minister of Jugoslavia.

A car was therefore procured for Darewski and a Union Jack mounted on the radiator. In it he motored to Gorizia, accompanied by Bebler and by Ivo Bozić, one of the SOE-trained radio operators who like Simčič had been dropped as a *padalec* in mission Livingstone I. The Italian sentries were so startled by this apparition that they did not think of challenging its passage. Altogether, to use Darewski's phrase, the Italians „were in a flat spin". But the general refused to let his men collaborate with the Partizans, on the grounds that he had had no orders from Rome. He had no stomach for fight, perhaps not unwisely so; for elsewhere, as soon as the Germans recovered their balance, Italian troops who did not submit to them were either carted off to camps in the Reich or, if they actively put up resistance as in the Greek Tonian islands, were killed off. Darewski tried to impress the general with a story that he and his party were an advance guard for more Allied paratroopers and at least got the general to assent to the Partizans helping themselves to his troops' stores and equipment.

No German troops had been stationed in Gorizia, but it did not take long for them to start arriving. Darewski now became involved in a Partizan attack to seize the town and its two railway stations – in which they were temporarily successful – and to occupy its airfield. They held the latter long enough to destroy the hangars and buildings, as well as 89 Italian aircraft on the ground; all except one plane, in which Bebler with a volunteer anti-fascist Italian pilot flew to report the course of events to the Partizan headquarters for Slovenia and, as Darewski quipped, to start a Partizan air force.

Darewski did further good work in arranging for the disarming of Italian troops who had been stationed in the interior of Jugoslavia and were streaming back through this area to reach their homes; some were still organised in their units, like an Alpini battalion, others were little more than a rabble. Among them were officers, including a general. Darewski also helped in training young Slovenes whom the Partizans were now mobilising and who mostly did not know one end of a rifle from the other. In this he was helped for a time by an anti-fascist major, until he too decided that it was time to be off, to home and wife; Darewski believed he was from the Bersaglieri light infantry, but according to Slovene historians he was in fact the local commander of the carabinieri or gendarmerie and was called Verde.

The Partizans held the offensive for perhaps a week. During this time Simčič led a demolition operation against a railway viaduct just east of Monfalcone on the line to Trieste, near where the motorway runs today. He used explosive from shells still lying around in this area of heavy fighting during the First World War; the viaduct was damaged, but not destroyed. Šuligoj was wounded in the stomach when sabotaging a bridge over the Vipava River at Miren near Gorizia and had to go to a Partizan hospital. His comrades half-joked that he probably owed his life to the fact that there was no food around and they were all nearly starving; his stomach was so empty as to be sterilised against any bullet wound.

Gorizia was too important for the Germans to let the Partizans remain in it undisturbed; they soon drove them out in a counter-offensive using vastly superior forces including tanks and aircraft. The Partizans, with Darewski, took refuge in the mountains to the east and north-

east (Trnovski gozd or Forest of Trnovo), where they were joined later in September by three important personalities sent by Partizan HQ Slovenia; Franc Leskošek – Luka, high in the political leadership (most Partizan leaders had an underground cover name and his was Luka); Lado Ambrožič – Novljan, in peacetime a teacher, amateur flyer and reserve officer in the Royal Jugoslav army; and Dušan Kveder – Tomaž, veteran like Bebler of the Spanish Civil War and a political commissar. Ambrožič took command of the Partizan forces, which were then grouped in what was designated as an Operational Zone but just before Christmas was to become the IX Corps of the Jugoslav Army of National Liberation (JANL).

2.
Two Views From The Basement

Darewski, despite his easy manner, did not spare criticisms of those with whom he came into contact. „The Slovenes are nearly all megalomaniacs“, was his summing up of them in his report. There were exceptions, however. Bebler, the political leader, „is a first-class man and will do everything possible to help us“. Bebler was able tactfully to put across to Darewski the importance the Partizans attached to supply drops and their disappointment at not receiving any so far. Ambrožič, the commander, was friendly and helpful, and „one of the few Slovenes I met who had a sense of humour“. On the other hand Kveder, the political commissar, „though helpful on the surface, was a definite obstructionist and anti-British agitator“.

Escaped British prisoners of war became an irritant for Darewski. They were an unforeseen problem. No one could have known, when he arrived, that Italy would soon surrender and that the gates of Italian prison camps would temporarily open, at least till the Germans arrived to shut them again. Escaped prisoners streamed in from across north Italy, from camps as far distant as the areas round Milan and Turin. Darewski consented to the first arrivals fighting with the Partizans, who saw them as a useful source of trained manpower. But differences of language, of culture and of fighting technique were too great for this kind of collaboration to work out in practice and it was soon given up. Altogether between 100 and 200 escapees passed through Darewski's territory. It was only with considerable difficulty that he persuaded the Partizans to allow them to leave, provided with guides to HQ Slovenia for evacuation.

„The ex-prisoners of war incidentally caused a great deal of trouble here by their behaviour“, he wrote. They „have developed a very peculiar outlook on life. This is of course natural after months of confinement, but they do not help themselves in the least“. Then, after most had been despatched on their way in groups to HQ Slovenia, „I have learnt that these parties refused to carry arms or in any way to defend themselves, and their conduct on this journey seems to have aroused a series of indignant protests and complaints from the villages through which they passed.”

* * *

While some escaped prisoners undoubtedly behaved badly, others were of a higher calibre. They were however equally of the opinion that they should not stay and fight with the Partizans. Their view is put in a report by a Major E. H. Gibbon, with some comments added by a New Zealand Captain D. J. Rideford. These two were among a large group escorted to HQ Slovenia for evacuation to Italy by Florjan, who will later appear in these pages as interpreter and assistant to another mission. Major Gibbon was a regular soldier – typically regular and straightforward, it would appear – from the Royal Tank Regiment, who had previously been awarded a DSO (Distinguished Service Order) for gallantry. His views in his report headed

„From Caporetto to Otočac" were perceptive and considered, but at the same time critical and controversial. He emphasised that the information he got was not what the staff of some Partizan unit would dish out at a higher level – an obvious reference to HQs hosting a British mission – but that he saw the Partizan movement at its grass roots on his long trek from Caporetto (Kobarid in Slovene) in the north-west across Slovenia to the south-east.

The immediate reason why the British ex-prisoners of war would not take up arms, as he expressed it in a talk with a junior commissar, was that „guerrilla warfare must be carried out in one's own district". This, on reflection, sounds sensible enough. A successful guerrilla must know the lie of the land. The present writer can confirm it; the Partizan unit he was with in central Serbia had a strong leavening of idealistic young intellectuals from distant Belgrade and industrial workers from towns with factories like Niš and Leskovac. When in country where the peasant population favoured Mihailović's Četniks, they blundered about in forest and mountainside and were easily lost because they did not know what lay beyond the next hill.

On a broader scale, Major Gibbon was doubtful about the overall military effectiveness and fighting qualities of the Partizans. He drew a distinction between the old Partizans who had joined by conviction and the larger numbers who had been conscripted since the Italian surrender in September 1943.

> „Generals were impressive as to knowledge and ability. Brigade and Battalion Commandants usually good honest fighting types trying to do a difficult job. Commissars, senior ones far too clever for me. Brigade and Battalion Commissars young, inexperienced, unlicked University students with no military experience repeating ad nauseam the same propaganda; dangerous people to have so much power."

In another passage:

> „Again it may be my lack of knowledge of guerrilla tactics but most of the junior Commanders impressed me as being incompetent and out of their depth."

As for the conscripts since Italy surrendered, these „were poor quality and inexperienced. I consider they submerged the better type who had been fighting before the Armistice. You could always tell an old Partizan from a new one, he had more guts; could look after himself and knew what he was doing". There had been a fair number of desertions among the conscripts: ten percent, or perhaps as many as twenty percent.

The major commented that, as he was a regular officer, his views might be „too regimented". But the Partizans he met were mostly more intent on „getting away and hiding" than on „watching till they saw a chance to strike". The Partizan, in short, only fought the German „when: 1) He can't avoid it; 2) He has got the German in a really tight corner; 3) I believe that the old Partizans before the Armistice did go looking for trouble but I don't think that is the policy at present".

Then, looking forward (in autumn 1943), he concluded:

„I consider there is room for real doubt whether the Partizans are determined to fight the German with all they have got; or whether they are marking time, keeping what they have so that they will be as strong as possible for the probable civil war that will break out when the Germans leave. Therefore, is real aid to them wasted or can we ensure them using it as we want?"

He could not see „why the Germans should waste time, material and men driving underground a movement which is incapable of denying them those parts of the country they require. They have a lot of other more pressing engagements".

In writing this Major Gibbon evidently went through a certain *crise de conscience*, for he inserted under the heading *A Personal Note*:

„I can hear cries of »shame«, and »look what they have succeeded in doing«, and »don't you realise the greatness of their achievement«. God knows I do; I owe my liberty to them and to what they have achieved, but I will not be stampeded into a sentiment-clouded judgement. I know the above conclusion is turning round and kicking those who helped me. But it is honest and, I think, unclouded by unnecessary sentiment or carefully selected information from their HQs."

* * *

Darewski was hardly more satisfied with his own little group. Referring to his *padalci*, he considered it bad policy, both for the British and the Partizans, to have „non-British and doubtful Slovenes" in direct radio contact with Cairo. He gave no reason for this gratuitous appellation of „doubtful". As for Corporal Hammond, his British radio operator, Darewski was particularly laconic. „Hammond unsatisfactory", he wrote; nothing more. So Hammond was got rid of and sent off in October on the evacuation route via HQ Slovenia. Here the area of liberated territory was large enough to enable people to be taken out and in from airstrips. There was no alternative but to replace him at the radio by SOE-trained Italo-Slovenes.

What was Hammond's fault? Though Darewski gives no clue, it is noteworthy that General Ambrožič was also quoted as saying he did not want Hammond back at Corps HQ. Slovene eyewitnesses have said that after the fall of Gorizia he paid too much attention to the wine and the women. He wanted to enjoy himself; was it not understandable, in a young man, after an enemy surrender?

Though Hammonds experience as radio operator for Crayon had been brief, his further adventures merit attention. On the way to HQ Slovenia he fell ill. He and his Partizan guides ran into a group of about 80 of these Allied escaped prisoners travelling in the same direction (possibly Gibbon's group?). But the going was slow; roads and railways that had to be crossed were patrolled by local forces serving the Germans and the group had to break up into parties of five or six. Hammond, by now in no fit state to go on, found himself with an escaped prisoner who complained of an ulcer and the two were conducted by Partizans to a village, Branica, within reach of Trieste.

Hammond believed he had a rupture. An Italian doctor sympathetic to the Partizan cause was called from Sežana, the first small town on the road leading inland from Trieste, and he diagnosed appendicitis, or rather „an abscess on the appendix“. So on 3 December 1943 the Partizans smuggled Hammond into Trieste under the nose of the Germans to a private nursing home. In a statement he made after his return, Hammond described it as being only three streets away from the German HQ; it is difficult to identify the place, since he merely called it by the generic name of the *Ospedale Clinical* (Clinical Hospital). The intention was to operate on him, but conditions were evidently considered too insecure and in the meantime he was given injections and, whatever this may mean, electrical treatment. The Partizans paid the then considerable sum of 20.000 lire for his care and treatment, perhaps out of funds that Darewski had brought and deposited with the Partizan HQ.

It would have been easy to betray Hammond. No one did. But the Germans at this time were bringing in reinforcements to Trieste, and the ground became too hot for his further stay. So on 24 December, three weeks later, Hammond was smuggled out again, back to Branica, where he was looked after by a sympathetic and romantically-inclined Partizan girl nurse. Hope had not been given up that he might return to Trieste for a surgical operation. In January he established contact again with Crayon at a meeting with Captain David Davies, who was on his way to succeed Darewski as head of the mission.

Davies informed Bari in a signal dated 27 January 1944 of Hammonds appendix trouble and his hope of having an operation; then startled Bari by adding that Hammond „asks to marry his nurse“. The information took a little time to go the rounds of SOE’s bureaucratic machine and, on 17 February, an answer was sent back. After expressing regret at Hammond's illness and telling Davies not to spare any expense over him, it said sharply, „Under no circumstances may he marry unless approval (is) given from this end, so send all details of prospective wife“. No details of the lady have survived on the file and Hammond made no mention of any girl in his statement after evacuation, so it cannot be said if this romance progressed.

At Branica Hammond remained for over three months. His stay was uneventful except for the passage of some shot down American airmen; Hammond received some small sums of lire from Davies by courier to maintain them and speed them on their way to HQ Slovenia and evacuation. Noteworthy are the help and support that Hammond received during this period from the Partizans, who had not only run the risk of keeping him in a hospital bed in an occupied city but now looked after him in the months until his departure. He was supplied, according to the statement he made after his return, with rations on a monthly basis of: 25 kilogrammes of white flour, 7 kg of white sugar, 4 kg of fresh butter, 30 kg of fresh meat „plus the usual extras“. This sounds a little excessive, given the short rations on which most of a hungry civilian population had to live; perhaps Hammond mixed up the difference between kilogrammes and pounds. Even so, the Partizans’ rations were an act of unusual munificence.

Hammond reported that the food was provided by the 13th Battalion. In so doing he failed to understand that he was the object of a heavy-handed joke and that they did not really want to tell him where they got it – probably the black market. For the 13th Battalion was a

mythical unit, often of ill omen. If a captured prisoner was told he would be posted to the 13th Battalion, it was a euphemism for saying he would be executed.

Meanwhile SOE had contacted Hammond's mother at home and on 1 April a signal to Crayon from Bari carried a message from her ending, „God be with you till we meet again." But he probably did not receive it, for that same day instructions were delivered from Davies to move with some more escaped Americans for evacuation; so on the following day he set off for HQ Slovenia. Hammond was back in Bari in early May and his account of his experiences is dated 9 May.

3.
Heroes Before Their Time

For all his lack of sympathy with the SOE Slovenes, Darewski acknowledged that the Slovene civilian population was „very solidly behind the Partizan movement“. It would have been surprising if it were not. Most of the population, living in the Italian region of Venezia Giulia, had suffered 20 years of misrule and persecution from an Italian government which denied to the Slovenes and Croats the very right to exist except as Italians. A smaller number, living further to the north-west in the area of Friuli known to the Slovenes as Benetija, had passed under Italian rule already in the preceding century and had been similarly denationalised.

Venezia Giulia was one of the Austrian territories, along with the Trentino and the South Tyrol, that Italy gained after the First World War thanks to a promise by Britain and France in the secret London agreement of 1915. Italy was bound to Austria and Germany under the Triple Alliance signed in 1882, but it was promised these lands in the post-war settlement if it turned on its allies and came into the war on the Anglo-French side. Loyalty, alas, is not a binding quality in love and war and by this act Italy gained in its north-east half a million Slav citizens.

In Venezia Giulia the population was mixed. Broadly speaking, Italians predominated in the main towns and Slovenes in the country; further down in Istria much of the countryside was peopled by Croats. This secret London promise has rankled ever since with Slovenes who dreamed of not being subject to a foreign ruler for the first time in history.

On entering this territory after the First World War, the Italian authorities initially promised the Slovenes the highest standards of minority rights and freedoms. But that did not last long. Governments in Rome, at first mildly, then harshly under fascism, instituted a policy of Italianisation. The country of Italy was to be inhabited only by Italians. The local people were told that Italian civilisation was more ancient and altogether superior and thus subject peoples like the Slovenes without a proper history of their own should naturally feel glad at being privileged to enjoy its benefits. Italian and only Italian, and not some uncouth foreign tongue or dialect, was to be the language used and spoken in public places and official dealings. Slovene schools, cultural institutions, businesses and banks were gradually shut. If someone wanted to get or keep a job, especially in public service, an Italianised surname and membership of the Fascist Party were often required. Public employees such as teachers and railwaymen of non-Italian origin, whose loyalty therefore could not be taken for granted, were moved to other parts of the country. Violent methods were used against recalcitrants in this ethnic *bonifica* or „reclamation“ – the term ethnic cleansing had not yet been invented. Victims would suffer personal beatings, sometimes with enforced and possibly fatal imbibement of castor or engine oil, or banishment (along with democratic Italian opponents of the regime) under police surveillance to a distant part of the country. Later, during the Second World War, internment or prison camps were set up, such as at Gonars in Friuli – now

known to passers-by as a filling station on the motorway – or on Arbe (Rab) island, a popular holiday resort in north Dalmatia.

Not surprisingly, many from the minority fled abroad, mostly to Jugoslavia; estimates vary from 70.000 to 100.000. Among those who remained, the ground was fertile for the growth of a resistance movement, which at first sprang up spontaneously in places like Gorizia, Trieste, and in the *karst* around Pivka, then called San Pietro del Carso. Intending resisters linked together in the TIGR organisation, whose foundation officially dates from a meeting on 31 August 1927 on Mount Nanos (in Italian, Monte Re), north-east of Trieste – not far from where Darewski was later to land. Today the Trieste – Ljubljana motorway passes beneath its slopes.

TIGR was an acronym for the places to be freed: Trieste, Istria, Gorizia and Rijeka (Fiume). It was a powerful, catchy name, suggesting a tiger, which is the same word in Slovene. Members were sworn to secrecy and were organised in cells and often in three man troikas, of which in theory only the head knew the next up the line. Two centres for the organisation sprang up, acting semi-independently, but in contact with each other. TIGR itself drew supporters from the area round Gorizia, while a more militant wing centred in Trieste was also known as Borba (Fight). Their common objective was incorporation in Jugoslavia – the state of the Southern Slavs – that had been born out of the First World War. It was essentially an underground nationalist movement, not a political party.

Besides distributing secretly publications and propaganda, TIGR resorted to more violent actions against the symbols of *„Italianita“*; though the intention was to avoid terrorism that would kill people. Schools and kindergartens, where of course teaching was only in the Italian language, were set on fire outside school hours. In January 1930 a bomb exploded, making a hole in the base of the main lighthouse in Trieste, the Faro della Vittoria; built not long before by the Italians, it had been so named to commemorate their victory in the war and offered an obvious target. Four days later, another bomb exploded in the editorial office of the local fascist newspaper, *Il Popolo di Trieste*. Despite the policy not to cause casualties, TIGR's agent had been misinformed that no one would be in the building at that time and a journalist was killed.

At first the authorities were caught off their feet. Then they made a, to them, lucky arrest in Gorizia. Thanks to the relentless use of torture, the police were led to the discovery of one name in the chain after another, though not all those involved were apprehended. A big trial was staged in September 1930, culminating in death sentences on four, which were carried out in Basovizza outside Trieste, where a monument now stands to their memory. Further trials were also held in Rome.

The village of Basovizza (Bazovica in Slovene) on the *karst* has the sad distinction of possessing two opposing memorials to injustice. Outside it, in another direction, is the controversial *foiba*, a disused mineshaft down which bodies were thrown; this occurred mostly during the Jugoslav occupation of Trieste in spring 1945, when the victims were predominantly Italians. No one knows how many bodies or people were disposed of in this

way, as the cavity has been sealed up, but estimates vary, often according to a person's political convictions. It is designated as an Italian national monument.

For years, in the battle of words fought on all sides after the war, Italian propaganda focused on the Basovizza *foiba*, while the Basovizza monument to the four Slovene anti-fascists was ignored. Many local Italian residents did not know of the latter's existence. On the other hand the term *foiba* was extended to cover the many Italians who had disappeared or not returned home. It was exploited by extreme nationalists to suggest that barbarian Slavs had thrown thousands of innocent Italians down *foibe* or sinkholes in the *karst*, in an orgy of genocide or anti-Italian ethnic cleansing. On the other hand a clearly inaccurate underestimate gave as about 40 the number of victims from Trieste in the Basovizza *foiba*.

President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi presumably relied on misguided information from his advisers when he reiterated the belief, on a visit to the city in spring 2002, that Italian Trieste had been subject to post-war ethnic cleansing during the Jugoslav occupation. Like many Italians, he was probably unaware that as many if not more Slovenes and Croats had perished in that period at the hands of the Jugoslavs; and that it was not Italians but local Slovenes and Croats who had been the first victims of ethnic cleansing, under Fascism between the two world wars.

It was a pioneering gesture when, in 2000, students from the United World College of the Adriatic at Duino – one of an international chain in the United World College movement – paid tribute to the victims at both Basovizza monuments, as well as at the Trieste Risiera; this was a small concentration camp set up by the Nazis in the later part of the war. Their visit was followed soon afterwards by one to all three sites by a woman member of the centre-left Rome government, the minister for equal opportunities. She was, it is true, from the most left-wing party in the coalition and came personally and not in the name of the government. These visits none the less helped to make a breach in a local Berlin wall that had stood for many years in people's minds.

TIGR can claim to be the first active anti-fascist resistance movement in Europe. Its leadership was gradually formed again after the 1930 setback and the direction of its operations was transferred to Slovenia proper; further demonstrative acts of violence were renounced. In December 1941 a second big trial of 70 people was held in Trieste, thanks to information about TIGR discovered by the Germans after their occupation of Jugoslavia in April of that year; they passed the information to the Italians, by now their allies in the war. The trial resulted in the execution of five accused, including a young Communist, Pinko Tomazič. The other victims were not Party members.

The TIGRovci boast of being the first to engage in armed conflict against the Italian forces of occupation in Slovenia proper. In a shoot-out near Ribnica, south of Ljubljana, on 13 May 1941 one of their leaders, Danilo Zelen, was killed when resisting arrest by carabinieri. This, it is worth noting, was before Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June and the Jugoslav Communist Party had of course not yet called for resistance against the foreign occupier; for Hitler and Stalin were still nominally on good terms, bound by a non-aggression pact under which they had divided Poland, and the war between Germany and Britain was described in

Communist parlance as a conflict between capitalist powers. Then on 1 July the TIGRovci in this area of Slovenia formed, as they proudly claimed, the first properly organised resistance unit, the Ribniška *četa* or company, consisting of 14 men; but the Communists were now in the war and, with their more powerful organisation, soon replaced its leadership with their own men.

4.
Bally & Co

The Englishman would drive with his bag to the rendezvous with Rejec on a Belgrade street corner in his open sports car at some time between 7 and 9 in the evening; late enough for it to be dusk or dark, not so late as to arouse the suspicions of any concierge or porter in some building nearby. The place chosen was always within walking distance of where Rejec lived. Bally would get out of his car and wait. Rejec would light a cigarette, approach cautiously and, when they were sure no passer-by was near, the one would hand over the bag to the other.

This was in 1940. Britain was at war with Germany and Italy, and the Jugoslav government, nominally still independent under the regency of Prince Paul, was under intense Axis pressure to crack down on all elements considered to be unfriendly. Albert Rejec was such a person. Born in 1899 at Tolmin in the upper Soča valley – Tolmino in the upper Isonzo valley, to use Italian names, for all the Isonzo was in 1940 part of Italy – he was prominent in TIGR and had had to flee to Jugoslavia, where he was leading a hand-to-mouth existence in Belgrade.

Rejec would carry the bag to his home, then take it in a taxi to the station, where he caught the 11:00 p.m. night train to Ljubljana. He would chose an „open plan“ carriage if possible and stow the bag on a rack some distance away, so that if there were any police checks during the night he could deny ownership. It was an awkward piece of luggage to drag around; obviously of foreign make, covered in green cloth and shaped as if it contained something bulky like an accordion, it could only too easily attract attention. In fact it was full of explosive. On later journeys Rejec decided to repack the material at home into locally-made suitcases and to take the day train to Ljubljana, on which police controls were less strict.

Danilo Zelen would be waiting for him at Ljubljana station and, with the help of friendly porters and railwaymen, they carted their luggage to Zelen's apartment. On the appointed day he and his associates would set off in a small car or on motorbikes ostensibly on a mountaineering excursion, with heavy rucksacks on their backs, which they would smuggle across the Italian frontier to TIGRovci on the other side. Zelen was an expert in explosives, and could show the others how to use them. The Englishman, who was from MI6 and referred to by the Slovenes as Bally, had provided a technical booklet about the use of the explosive – called by Rejec „nitrotoluene“, presumably trinitrotoluene (TNT) – which Rejec translated into Slovene.

This account is not out of some stereotyped spy novel, but is told by Rejec in depositions he made to the Jugoslav authorities after the war. It has been known for some time that links existed between TIGR and the SIS (Secret Intelligence Service), otherwise called MI6. Officially, MI6’s files are secret and inaccessible; in fact however a good deal about the service's activities has seeped into public knowledge in Britain, from memoirs by ex-MI6 officers, from independent investigations, and latterly by release of certain early SOE and related material

to the Public Record Office. For the section of MI6 involved. Known as Section D, was one of the parents of SOE when it was founded in July 1940, and many Section D agents were to emerge as SOE officers; though the two organisations, M16 (cover name ISLD or Inter-Services Liaison Department) and SOE continued to run separate – sometimes collaborative, sometimes rival – operations in Jugoslavia and Italy throughout the war.

Rejec's depositions throw interesting and complementary Slovene light on what is – and perhaps will be more so in future – available from British sources. It should be borne in mind however that his familiarity with English was imperfect. For example, S.W. Bally, described as a mining engineer from the Trepča mines in Serbia, is Colonel Bill Bailey, agent of Section D, who was to play a leading role in the Jugoslav section of SOE and became liaison officer to the Četnik commander, Draža Mihailović.

It was after Britain and France went to war with Germany in September 1939 that Zelen and Rejec sought contact with the Western Allies, in the hope of obtaining covert support for the TIGR movement. The French, Rejec relates, were „passive". But the British showed interest.

For some years, it will be recalled, British policy had been particularly hostile towards fascist Italy. In the British government the young and handsome Anthony Eden was in the forefront of the campaign at the League of Nations to impose sanctions on Italy for its invasion of Abyssinia, as Ethiopia was then called. A strong Italian fascist presence in the Horn of Africa was most undesirable for Britain; Italy would be in a position to threaten links with the empire in the Far East, particularly with the richest colony, India. TIGR represented a potential area of disaffection inside Italy that, to London's eye, was clearly worth exploiting.

Rejec's says his first contact had been made with a certain Evans, press officer at the British Consulate in Zagreb, whom Zelen and Rejec used to meet by appointment in a café opposite Ljubljana railway station. Married to a Czech, Evans had come from a post in Rumania. Small, thickset and rather coarse-mannered, Evans was uncouth in his movements, „as if he were cutting the air at an angle"; his teeth were discoloured by heavy smoking, though he was not much more than 30. „Yet in my opinion he was the only Englishman who was up to his job."

A contact in Ljubljana itself was Alec Lawrenson, reader in English at the university there. Rejec describes him as „an improvised agent", who unlike Evans was not particularly good or discreet at his job; in fact „half Ljubljana knew what he was doing". Later he was given the protective cover of vice-consul. Documents released to the PRO, however, show that he was extremely active in his anti-Axles work, notably in arranging sabotage to damage rolling stock on the railway. Abrasive lubricant was introduced into the axles of goods wagons, causing at least minor inconvenience.

Lawrenson was also given an assistant, G. S. Frodsham, whom Rejec presumably did not know: for soon after his appointment, when Lawrensen was absent from Ljubljana, Frodsham was found dead in his flat, poisoned by gas. Officially a case of suicide, he was believed to have been murdered by the Gestapo.

In Belgrade. where he moved from Slovenia, Rejec said his contacts were with a certain Julius Hanau, then with his successor „Bally“ and the assistant military attaché – unnamed – at the British Legation. He also met several times for a drink at a café a young secretary at the British Legation, Julian Amery. Son of a cabinet minister, Leopold, and brother of a wartime traitor named John who went over to the Nazis, Julian Amery was active in the Albanian section of SOE during the war and after it had a career in British public life. He and Rejec used to discuss the political situation „but nothing concrete came out of these talks“.

Rejec was introduced to Hanau, presumably the MI6 station chief, by Dr Becker, a chatty German socialist who had fled from the Nazis. Hanau has been described as a British or South African Jew, aged about 50, who was reputed to have made a fortune selling old military equipment after the First World War and who acted as a representative for British firms from an office in the building housing the Ruski Car café in Belgrade. Hanau had plans for suborning Danube pilots with money and enticing them to obstruct traffic at the Iron Gates narrows, but the Jugoslav authorities got wind of this, apparently through loose talk by Becker, and pilots were put under supervision and some handed over to the Gestapo. Hanau has also been described in British accounts as trying to mount a sabotage operation from river craft manned by British naval ratings that would sail up from the Black Sea, but they got no further than Rumania before being discovered. As a consequence of all this Hanau had to leave the country and was succeeded by „Bally“, who installed himself in an office near the Majestic hotel.

The first arrangements for collaboration between TIGR and the British were made with Hanau. Initially Rejec tried to get something in writing that, in exchange for their collaboration, the British government would pledge support in solving the Slovenes' ethnic problems in Italian Venezia Giulia and in southern Austria after the war, but he appears to have obtained nothing more than a verbal promise that Hanau would write about this to friends in the Conservative Party in England.

The deal was that TIGR would provide intelligence information in exchange for explosive for sabotage and (on at least one occasion) radio equipment. The British did not give directives on what sabotage they expected TIGR to do; that was up to the TIGRovci to decide. In exchange, they wanted to receive information on German and Italian military developments wherever obtainable by the Slovene minorities in Italy and Austria; they were particularly interested in reports about new torpedoes being produced at the Whitehead torpedo works in Rijeka (Fiume) and about submarines being built near Monfalcone on the coast west of Trieste. The TIGRovei were reported to have succeeded in providing information about the Italian defences of Tobruk in Libya, which – it is speculated – may have facilitated the capture of that stronghold by the British forces in the Western Desert under General Wavell; this is said by Slovene sources to have emerged during the second, 1941 Trieste trial of Slovene patriots.

After „engineer Bally“ succeeded Hanau, Rejec paid several visits to his office, which consisted of three or four rooms disguised as the representation of some industrial concern. In a side room „Bally“ kept samples of explosives smuggled in via Greece. He would take them out and explain their characteristics: some were hard, some were plastic and pliable, some

were in the form of an ingenious pencil in which acid detonated the explosive after a predetermined period of time. These pencils were issued to SOE missions in the war and used by them with success. Rejec accepted some and his comrades tried them out, but decided against using them; perhaps they did not fully master their working. „Bally“ also gave them anti-Hitler propaganda to spread around. But Rejec thought it too crude and clumsy to be effective and the TIGRovci did not distribute it.

Rejec claims that several acts of sabotage were performed, though it is not possible from his account to know how effective they were. He spoke of pieces of railway track being blown up in spring 1940, of attacks on factories and ammunition dumps, and of damage done to electricity pylons. These all took place in southern Austria and in north-east Italy, but as will be seen in a later chapter on Alojz Knez – one of the participants in Austrian Styria – the results appear to have been modest.

All these acts of course ceased when Germany and Italy overran Jugoslavia in April 1941. Rejec hid for a time under a false name in Belgrade, then fled for an underground existence in the interior of Serbia.

* * *

This MI6 – TIGR collaboration offered an excuse for the Jugoslav Communist Party after the war to make accusations against TIGR. Not only were its members described as bourgeois nationalists, chauvinists and reactionaries, but they were alleged to be spies, a mere cover organisation for the British Intelligence Service. The Freedom Front (*Osvobodilna Fronta*), led by the Communists and the rallying point for all honest democrats, had been the one and only promoter of resistance against the Nazis and Fascists; such at least was the Party line. It had already been conveniently forgotten that the Freedom Front had been brought into existence as a so-called Anti-Imperialist Front against western powers, at a time when the Soviet Union had a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. But in the fight against Nazi-Fascism the Party could not afford to let the belief circulate that it had got off to a later start than some other organisation or movement; no honour or credit should therefore be given to TIGR.

This attitude clashed with vivid memories in the Primorska of genuine popular support for TIGR; memories that persisted for years after the war. Why, people asked, were books and publications about TIGR not permitted in Jugoslavia? Why were TIGR members not allowed to form their own section of the veterans association? Why were former TIGRovci not eligible for the Partizan decoration that attested early membership of the resistance, since 1941? Faced by widespread murmurs of discontent, the Executive Committee of the Slovene League of Communists met on 13 June 1958 to discuss the matter at length.

The minutes of the meeting’s discussion of this question – it was one of three points on the agenda – have been published in *Primorski Rodoljub*, magazine of the TIGR veterans in its issue number 5 of 2001. The numerous speeches were along much the same condemnatory lines, though Ivan Maček, the first head of OZNA in Slovenia, admitted that there had been well-intentioned men among them. „We may not attribute any merits to this organisation“, he

said, „although there were some honest people in this organisation and they fought honestly, believing that they were serving a good cause. Yet“, he continued, „in 1941 not all TIGRovci joined the National Liberation Army but some went off to the Be-ga (*Bela Garda*, or collaborationist White Guard) and other detachments hostile to us“. A note to the minutes said that after the victory of fascism the opposition of the Italian Communist Party was weakened and „the Slovene bourgeoisie exploited this situation to set up its own organisation Tiger (sic), which developed into a common espionage organisation“. Ex-members were now making claims for recognition. „The renewed activation of members of the former Tiger organisation, among whom the most active is the former and once more active English agent Albert Rejec, is a serious problem. Behind it is hidden a foreign espionage operation. Certainly not of particular political danger, but there are possibilities of exploitation by an espionage organisation that could also make use of individual disgruntled communists. The renewed affirmation of Tiger would also harm our relations with Italy.“

The conclusion was thus the same as before. No recognition must be given to TIGR. In addition Rejec should be called in for interrogation; articles should appear in the local press cutting TIGR ’s role in resistance in the Primorska down to size; and local Party organisations and bodies should be informed of how matters stood.

As was to be expected, the floodgates opened after the birth of Slovenia as an independent and democratic state in June 1991. There are now numerous accounts and memoirs of the ethnic Slovenes’ struggle to assert their identity against fascist Italian oppression between the two world wars.

5.
Whom To Support

On 5 March 1941, a month before Germany's attack on Jugoslavia, a travel document was issued by a British consular official in Belgrade to a certain Ciril Hayek. With this document Hayek, who had been living in hiding in Belgrade for the previous six months, was able to escape to Bulgaria and Istanbul and thence to the Middle East. Hayek was a false name for Ivan Rudolf. A native from the village of Podnanos in the Vipava valley then in Italy, Rudolf was one of the TIGRovci who had taken refuge in Jugoslavia. His son, Saša Rudolf, who in later years headed the Slovene language section in Trieste of the Italian state broadcasting corporation RAI, recounts in a book of reminiscences how the Gestapo were on his father's trail and he had to flee.

The British helped a number of political sympathisers to escape in this way from Jugoslavia to Turkey and then to the Middle East. Another was Ivan Marija Čok. A lawyer from a village outside Trieste, Čok was not a military figure; rather, he aspired to the political leadership of the Slovenes from the Primorska and was active in their cause when he was in Cairo and, later, in Britain and the United States. Unfortunately he did not get on with Slovene members of the exiled government in London and his achievements fell short of his aspirations.

Once in Cairo, Rudolf worked closely with the British military and intelligence authorities including M16. He was given facilities to visit prisoner of war camps and recruited numerous Slovenes who, called up into the Italian forces, had fallen into British hands as prisoners or deserters in the Western Desert. Many joined a Royal Jugoslav battalion that was formed in the Middle East. Rudolf also handpicked a small group of Slovenes who volunteered for special work; they were to form the core of the *padalci* from MI6. They were given training in parachuting, radio operating, sabotage and intelligence gathering, in preparation for infiltrating them back into their homeland.

A look at the map shows the importance to the Allied command of accurate intelligence from Venezia Giulia and Slovenia. Even though Mussolini had originally taken a rather paternal attitude towards Hitler, it was already clear before war broke out that Germany was by far the senior partner. Once Italy went into battle, Germany found it had increasingly to aid its weaker ally, whose forces suffered defeat after defeat in Greece and the Western Desert; and, after Italy's surrender in September 1943, Mussolini's so-called Italian Socialist Republic would not have existed but for support received from Germany.

Direct communications however between these two allies – above all rail links – were inadequate; geographically, neutral Switzerland got in the way. To the west, rail lines entered Italy from France, but entailed an unsatisfactory detour for German supplies. To the east of Switzerland was the Brenner route from Austria, which had to carry a disproportionately heavy burden of traffic. East of that were three rail links from Austrian Carinthia and Styria leading to Friuli and Venezia Giulia in north-east Italy; they all crossed territory with Slovene

inhabitants. Venezia Giulia, moreover, had important ports, shipyards and engineering works in Trieste along with Monfalcone, Fiume (Rijeka), and Pola (Pula). It would pay much more immediate dividends to the Allies if they could make the enemy suffer in this area than in, say, Bosnia or Montenegro.

Though the British headquarters for the Middle East in Cairo pullulated with rumours and gossip of all kinds about occupied Europe, little accurate information was available about the strength and potential effectiveness of resistance movements in Slovenia. SOE had been toying since spring 1942 with the idea of infiltrating agents, for the purpose of establishing radio communication with whatever groups existed. But knowledge about them was nebulous in the extreme. Colonel Draža Mihailović of the Royal Jugoslav army commanded the Četnik movement in Serbia and had informed the Jugoslav government in exile in London that his representative in Slovenia was a Major Karel Novak, also a regular officer. Novak was reported to be at the head of a group of Četnik irregulars known popularly as Blue Guards; did they have an organisation on the ground, or merely on paper? SOE and intelligence reports of the time give various names of politicians believed to be planning resistance. Mention is made of „the so-called Tchok organisation, who had rendered important services in1940“ (i.e. TIGR, with whom Ivan Marija Čok was linked, and whose involvement with MI6 is thus confirmed). Unfortunately many of TIGR's members had been put out of action at a big trial in Trieste in December 1941; the Axis powers had found valuable files about it when they entered Belgrade in the previous April, enabling the Italians to make numerous arrests. Then there was said to be an „Osvoboditelni Front“ which had just been formed – misnomer for the *Osvobodilna Fronta* or Freedom Front, the political umbrella organisation of the Partizans.

Telegrams and despatches were exchanged between Cairo and London in 1942 and early 1943 about what resistance forces really existed and how they could be reached and supported. The upshot of these exchanges was that a first planeload, of six Cairo-trained *padalci*, jumped from a Flying Fortress during the night of 17/18 March 1943. It was a composite operation, organised by M16 and not by SOE, that was not carried out as had originally been planned. Three were parachuted to Major Novak, in the hills west of Ljubljana not far from the old border with Italy. Then the Flying Fortress veered west and dropped three others on a mountainside overlooking the Soča (Isonzo) valley, north of Gorizia. This point, less thickly wooded than it is now, overlooks a cement works at Anhovo (Salona d'Isonzo in Italian) and has views reaching to the high Alps. This second troika jumped „blind“, in the hope of making contact with Partizans.

At first sight, it seemed a balanced, symmetrical attempt by Cairo to ascertain what was going on; three men to Četniks, and three to Partizans. But it was not.

Those received by Major Novak were Anton Božnar, Venceslav Ferjančič and Bojan Koler. Božnar was in a different category from the others. Already aged 33, he was not from the Primorska but from Polhov Gradec in Slovenia itself. When war broke out he was radio operator in a Jugoslav merchant ship sunk by the Germans off the west coast of Ireland. Božnar was taken to Dublin and then London, where he worked in the offices of the Jugoslav government in exile. From there one of its ministers, Miha Krek of the Slovene Clerical Party,

sent him to Cairo for the usual training with ISLD. He had been instructed to go alone to Novak bearing messages and a parcel from Krek. Besides operating normal radio „schedules“ back to the British in Cairo, Božnar was also to establish a separate regular radio link with Krek, who would thus have his own channel of communication with Slovenia, independently of the British and also, apparently, of other members of the exile government and even of Major Novak.

Božnar appears to have worked faithfully and loyally for both masters. When the Četnik forces in Slovenia, who had never been of any military consequence, collapsed after Italy's surrender on 8 September 1943 – bringing the end of the Italian occupation of western Slovenia – Božnar was captured by the Partizans, interrogated and killed.

Ferjančič and Koler were to jump „blind“ at a point further west, there to seek contact with resistance groups, presumably Partizans. But immediately before their departure from Derna airfield in Libya Koler sprang a high temperature. A doctor advised delaying the operation; but Desmond Clark, the ISLD officer seeing them off, pointed out that the aircraft was at their disposal only for that night and Koler himself did not want to be left behind. So the two were hitched on to Bonar, with the understanding that, once Koler had recovered, they would strike off on their own. Some time after arrival Koler was murdered by Četniks, who had discovered that he was preparing to join the Partizans; Ferjančič was to survive the war and emigrate to Argentina.

The second troika consisted of Radoslav Semolič as head, Miroslav Krizmančič as radio operator and Nikolaj Sever as assistant operator. They too did not end up at their planned destination. Their brief was to provide intelligence about shipping, shipbuilding and military movements in and around Trieste and Cairo had thought that Mount Nanos would be a good vantage point for this. But their common sense as country folk told them that they should go somewhere where they knew their way around and none had been to Nanos. So they insisted on the eastern side of the Soča valley. For in a village here lived a girlfriend of Sever; and personal acquaintance could be all-important if they were to turn up unannounced among suspicious hosts.

After landing safely and knocking at the door of an incredulous peasant, the three came across the brother of Sever's girlfriend and contact with the Partizans was, after a little delay, established. Unfortunately they had difficulties over communications. They had been provided with two radio transmitters, one working off electric current, the other off accumulators. The latter set had the obvious advantage that it could be worked anywhere in the wilds, without need of electricity. But unfortunately this set got jammed while being pushed out of the aircraft over the dropping ground and was taken back in it to Libya. They had to wait till a cable from a house above the Anhovo cement works could be laid 200 metres uphill into the forest before they could connect their sole radio set and start regular communication with Cairo. This was on 26 April. Five weeks had passed since their arrival.

At this period Colonel Jaka Avšič, deputy chief of staff at HQ Slovenia, came on a visit of inspection. His task was to organise the establishment of two Partizan brigades from a large

number of volunteers who had come in, untrained and ill-armed. The arrival of the Semolič mission proved to be more than a fortunate coincidence.

Avšič sent over their radio a message to the „high command of the English imperial forces“ in the Middle East in which he described the situation, offered collaboration and requested supplies for about 2.000 men (as Darewski was subsequently briefed to expect): mainly light arms, explosive, radio and telephone equipment. The message was not in code but in clear and signed with Avšič's own name; highly insecure, but there was probably little alternative if he was to make himself known to the British. During the night 20/21 June, three months after their arrival, the Semolič group received a first drop of arms and explosive.

Semolič and the others pursued an open policy of letting the Partizans know just what they were doing and what they were transmitting over the air. This helped to establish an atmosphere of confidence. The Partizans, through a contact working in a shipyard, gave them detailed information about warships and merchant ships in port and under construction in Trieste and they were able to send back this valuable intelligence to Cairo.

The security officer of the local Partizan unit reported that they „made an excellent impression“. Edvard Kardelj, number two to Tito in the Jugoslav Partizan movement and a Slovene, said in a message to Tito in June, „All three behave very sincerely; they are all workers, Slovenes, linked with Cairo.“ It was a promising start; the groundwork for fruitful cooperation appeared to have been laid.

* * *

In theory, MI6 or ISLD was meant to concentrate on intelligence and SOE on fanning resistance. In practice the division was less clear and their activities often overlapped. Sometimes members of the two organisations were at daggers drawn, often due to personal jealousies; at other times, they worked hand in glove; and at others, they operated independently of each other. The latter was the case with the early missions sent to the Primorska. The first ISLD groups, under Semolič and Božnar, had already arrived in March. Now, on the night of 18/19 July 1943 Stanko Simčič and Ivan Božič of SOE dropped from a Liberator bomber as mission Livingstone 1 on Šentviška planota (Monte San Vito) in the uplands east of the Soča (Isonzo) valley. Out of the same plane, with separate instructions, came John Leonard and Alojz Sivec, both of ISLD. The two groups had only met at Derna airfield before departure.

Leonard, a Slovene whose family originated from the Primorska, had served on the secretarial staff of minister Krek in the exile government, and thus – like Božnar – could be seen as a „clerical“ element in the group, though he soon embraced the Partizan cause wholeheartedly. He claimed to be a captain in the British army, and thus of higher rank than the others. Sivec was his radio operator. Their ISLD mission was codenamed Moth, and soon after it arrived it was conducted by the Partizans to HQ Slovenia in Slovenia itself.

Božič had a good landing, but Simčič did not. He has related how, the last of the four to jump, he was caught by the wind and landed some distance away in a tree. After disentangling

himself he hid his parachute and waited; no one came to look for him. He made his way downhill and, after daybreak, came across peasants who warned that some Italian troops were stationed nearby. So they took him into a house, where he was given a peasant woman's clothes to change into, together with basket and rake, and led to a wood to lie up all day. At dusk a woman came and conducted him to the Partizans, nearly 24 hours late.

Simčič and Božič were well received by the Partizans. One of their leaders was the Spanish Civil War veteran, Dušan Kveder – Tomaž, who happened to know Božić's brother Boris when both were exiles in Paris; a personal link was thus established. The mission got its radio transmitter working with Cairo, and Simčič and Božič prepared to receive Major Darewski and his group who arrived nearly four weeks later.

6.
A Hornet's Nest

Darewski was lucky to work in the Primorska, an area where the population was so well disposed towards the British; where some of the more politically conscious had already collaborated with the British Secret Service; and where popular feeling, thanks to two decades of Fascist oppression, was strongly behind the Partizans. In this he was more favoured than some BLOs in other parts of Jugoslavia.

In Slovenia proper the Roman Catholic hierarchy stood for collaboration with the Germans and Italians in fighting Communism. For them and their faithful, Bolshevism was the real enemy, more so than Nazism or Fascism. In Rome the Pope himself, Pius XII, avoided coming out squarely on the side of democracy against Nazi-Fascism; he has been much criticised for this in controversies well outside the scope of these pages. The devout Roman Catholic received no encouragement from his Church to take up resistance against the occupier.

On the contrary, if a Slovene villager reacted at all, it was as likely to be against the violence – the destruction, the killings – perpetrated in his neighbourhood by the left-wing resistance. The countryman is traditionally conservative, long-suffering and reluctant to accept revolutionary change in the social order. Before long village guards were formed, to protect lives and property. After Italy's surrender the Germans took control over the whole area and established a militia, the Domobranci, whose task was to maintain law and order and help suppress Partizan „bandits". The belief was widespread that this was only a temporary situation; the Allies would assuredly stage a landing somewhere on the coast, and it would be enough to keep heads down for the time being, even if – as was the case – that meant taking an oath of obedience to the Germans and serving under their command.

While some Domobranci did not look further than their own cabbage patch, others in this way felt able to argue that they were not really collaborators but democrats. They would await the Western Allies after their landing, then stand by them to fight the Bolshevik danger. When the British arrived in north-east Italy at the end of the war they were, to put it mildly, surprised to be confronted by these prisoners in enemy uniform who told them they had been on their side all along. It seemed too much like a double life insurance on the outcome of the war. Perhaps for some it was; in others these were views sincerely held. The film of life is multicoloured, not black and white.

In Croatia the Catholic Church once again took up an equivocal position; it let itself be identified with the so-called Independent State of Croatia under the Ustaša dictator Ante Pavelić. The primate, Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac, who was beatified many years afterwards by Pope John Paul II, was a controversial figure. Though in private he expressed reservations about the Ustaša regime's misdeeds, not to say atrocities, he was loyal to it in public. Others in the Church hierarchy made no secret of their enthusiasm for the Ustaši. Consequently the Ustaši had a following among the Catholic peasantry. In Bosnia, the Germans gained adherents

by recruiting Moslems and forming them into the so-called SS „Handžar“ division. In Serbia, the population certainly had had warm feelings towards the British ever since alliance in the First World War, but these feelings found expression through the Četnik movement of Draža Mihailović, by now bitter enemy of the Partizans. Memories were still alive among them of the enormous casualties that Serbia had suffered during that first war and they were loath to expose themselves unduly towards the foreign occupier – or, at least, not till the moment when final victory would be sure.

* * *

Partizan HQ, accompanied by Darewski and his mission, withdrew north to Cerkno in the face of the offensive launched by the Germans to regain ground lost in Italy's surrender. Cerkno is a small town, off the beaten track, nestling in a valley surrounded by hills of 700 – 800 metres and dominated to the north by the 1.630 metres high Mount Porezen. Further up into the hills, in a gulch in a side valley, the Partizans were to establish a camouflaged hutted hospital, known as Franja, from the name of the head doctor, which the enemy never discovered. It has been preserved as a museum, well worth a visit.

In Cerkno Darewski put his hand, so to speak, into a hornet's nest, though he was able to withdraw it without being stung at the time. His report does not make clear on which day he arrived and how long he stayed. He wrote rather loosely that he came at the end of October, together with the Partizan leaders Luka (Franc Leskošek, „on a high level in Slovene HQ“ as Darewski described him), Tomaž (Dušan Kveder, political commissar), and Novljan (Lado Ambrožič, commander). With them was an escaped prisoner, a British army doctor, Major Stupple of the RAMC. Darewski indicates that they left Cerkno again on 1 November; in other words, almost immediately, which would have been too short a stay to be credible, for he had enough time to wander around and strike up acquaintances. On the other hand Sergeant Hammond, in the statement made in Italy after his evacuation, says the party arrived in Cerkno about 21 October and stayed for about 10 days. This sounds more likely.

Darewski was lodged at the Hotel Porezen, hard by the church. He was able to enjoy creature comforts once again, and appreciated the care of the hotel owner, who looked after the needs of himself and of Allied escaped prisoners of war, now turning up in increasing numbers. „I would like to record here the name of the hotel proprietress“, he wrote, „who was very good to any of our lads who came through and gave every assistance – Elizabeta Magajne.“

Darewski gives no clue as to what he did during his stay in Cerkno. From Slovene sources we have it that in a chance meeting in the street he ran into a certain Hubert Ranzinger, an engineer who managed a small copper mine in the vicinity. He was also invited, perhaps more than once, into a house, number 56, where he met some company who provided a change to the usual faces he had been among; besides Ranzinger, there was Lado Pišanc, parish priest originally from a suburb of Trieste, and Pavla Paa, teacher at the local school. Darewski probably felt able to talk freely; he would have had a professional interest in gaining

information for SOE about the copper mine's production, as well as about local conditions in general.

The stay was in any case cut short. On 31 October German aircraft appeared, bombing and machine-gunning the HQ and town centre. Darewski said there were eight Henschells, while General Ambrožič in a conversation in 1998 remembered them as three Stukas; no matter how many, the damage was done. Among the British, Major Stupple, who had been attending to some sick in a first-aid post, came out to have a look and was injured in the stomach, dying about two hours later. He was buried in the churchyard. Another escaped prisoner, a Captain Ratcliffe, was also wounded. After the war, Major Stupple was disinterred and his remains were sent to England.

The bombing, Darewski was informed, came about as the result of information passed by Gestapo agents in the town who had been unmasked. „On 1 November a Gestapo spy ring was caught and liquidated in Cerkno and I was told about this with much joy the same day", he wrote in his report.

But Cerkno was no longer safe. That day, 1 November, the HQ and the mission moved off to the south, the mission and *padalci* being accommodated in houses at Šebrelje.

„If the Germans come to Cerkno, Major Darewski said not to hinder their work, but to behave quite passively and also, with food and information, to help the Germans against the Partizans." These words are from a report written some months later about what was called the Gestapo incident – the discovery of the alleged spy ring – by Partizan Captain Bojan Štih, officer of the security forces. The Partizans had arrested eight of the group which met at house number 56, including Ranzinger, and accused them of being traitors. They were alleged to be supporters of General Mihailović and his Četniks, whose organisation was commonly known as the Blue Guard and to have links with the Gestapo.

Darewski, according to Štih's report, had seen the group twice, and instructed them verbally to penetrate secretly the Partizans and their political organisation, the *Osvobodilna Fronta* (OF) or Liberation Front, while Paa was to incite the local women to express criticism of the national liberation struggle. Ranzinger was alleged to have the role of maintaining links, through a courier, with the Gestapo. Then Darewski, it was claimed, had said that when the Anglo-Americans arrived (presumably from Italy, or perhaps from a landing in Istria?) the Blue Guard were to rise up and take over power from the Partizans; the Anglo-Americans would recognise them as allies and help them to clean up the Partizan „vermin". Darewski had told the priest Piščanc – at least the latter said so under interrogation – that there would soon be an end to their sufferings under godless communism. In his conversations Darewski had furthermore made clear that he had come in no way as a representative of the Partizan armed forces but was using his presence with them purely to obtain intelligence.

So much for Captain Štih's report. He concluded, „Major Darewski's activity lay in the fact that with his statements he undoubtedly contributed to developing the organisation of the Blues, that he encouraged and abetted them, absolving them from any punishment by the people's justice, because they would be saved from that by the English. It is also clear that

Darewski in this manner had also probably links with the Gestapo, that is with Ranzinger's courier" (whose name is given here).

What an extraordinary piece of double-crossing this would make, on the part of a British officer – of Jewish origin, moreover – who had voluntarily arrived at the risk of his life to help resistance against the Germans. Of course the history of secret intelligence abounds with tales of double and even triple agents. But if the story had appeared at all plausible to his chiefs in SOE, Darewski would at least have been subjected to an enquiry after his return to base. Instead, he was sent on another mission in occupied Europe.

The Ranzinger group were immediately tried „in the name of the Slovene people" (not the Jugoslav people, it is worth noting, although there was then no question of Slovenia seceding from Jugoslavia). The trial took place in the village of Jagršče, near Šebrelje; Štih presided over the military court, while commander Ambrožič acted as prosecutor.

Ranzinger and an alleged informant or courier with the Gestapo – though not the one mentioned in Štih's report above – were found guilty and executed in the first half of November. Ranzinger's chance of survival may have been adversely affected by two facts; first, that he had some time previously served with the Partizans but had deserted or somehow left them; and second, that when already under arrest he had escaped during the German air attack, only to be found again and rearrested in a peasant's house outside Cerkno. No credible evidence of any Gestapo or treasonable links emerged against Ranzinger – let alone against Darewski – from the copies of his interrogations that have survived. From the material to hand Ranzinger appears to have been a loyal Jugoslav; loyal in the sense that his feelings lay with the pre-war royalist authority. Due to his name, he has more than once been assumed in Slovene reports to be from the German-speaking colony of Volksdeutsche settled for many years at Kočevje (Gottschee) in southern Slovenia, but the evidence indicates that he was in fact Slovene. The life of the priest Piščanc on the other hand was spared; he was confined to Cerkno but allowed to serve mass in his church. The others were acquitted.

Piščanc and the others were, it is true, rounded up and shot out of hand the following January; they were among a group of 15 accused of being „White Guardists" or collaborationists. But that is another story, with which the British missions had no connection. On 27 January 1944 a company of German troops took advantage of slack Partizan security and mounted a surprise attack on a school of Communist Party cadres that was temporarily in Cerkno. They killed 48 people, more than half of them young students whom the movement could ill afford to lose. Outraged by their defeat the local Partizan authorities, instead of making a factual investigation into why their security had failed, summarily executed these „traitors" on their doorstep. Their decision was later questioned by their own security chiefs higher up.

Darewski in the meantime was at Šebrelje, free to roam around – although two metres of snow were on the ground – and blissfully unaware that anything was being cooked up against him. In fact, as he wrote later in his report, if they had really suspected him, they would not have allowed him „an inch of freedom".

He was getting fed up or, as he put it in the army slang of the time, completely „browned off“. He had done good work at Gorizia, but was now feeling useless. He had come to bring material support to the local resistance movement, yet so far no supplies had been dropped to him by air and a discouraging message from base on 17 October had informed him that „very few“ sorties would be made during the winter months and it would be no good for him to make further demands for supplies. His experience compared unfavourably in the eyes of the Partizans to that of the Semolič mission who, though junior in rank, had successfully received supply drops.

Darewski was also irked by continual „jibes“ from the Partizans about the lack of supplies, about the Western Allies' failure to open up a second front and about their slow progress in the fighting in Italy; as well as by the Partizans' lack of cooperation in providing intelligence information. In a message to base in Cairo on 7 November he said, „Consider that I cannot serve any further useful purpose (in) this area.“ He followed this with a signal asking to be moved „to a more active zone“.

Before an answer could come, the enemy had forced the mission to move again – further south, to around the area of Čepovan and Lokve – and the Teheran summit had taken place between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. As a repercussion of this successful East-West conference, Darewski found that the Partizans became much more cooperative; they sent a letter asking him to remain with their headquarters. In this period a message was transmitted to him from base dated 14 December that his mother had died the previous night, though it is not known whether he received it.

On a personal level Darewski continued to have good relations with the Partizans. He praised arrangements by the Partizan women's organisation, which for Christmas sent every Partizan soldier in the Primorska a parcel from the civilian population, usually of gloves or socks, cake and fruit. „This was a splendid effort“, he commented.

At last on 3 January 1944 Darewski received his answer; he was told to make his way to HQ Slovenia, to report to the BLO there, Major Jones.

7.
Transmission Troubles

In the meantime a distasteful quarrel had broken out after the mission and *padalci* arrived in Šebrelje. Though it arose over a technical matter, concerning wavelengths or frequencies, it could have had life or death consequences. Darewski was not involved, but the *padalci* trained by ISLD and SOE as radio operators were in the middle of it.

Šebrelje is reached by a road, now asphalted, that winds up from the deep Idrija valley through thick woods, then suddenly comes out on a plateau of open green meadows. It is a peaceful, pastoral scene, encompassing a church and a small nucleus of farmhouses, then other houses widely straggling out to left and right. The village seems to live in a world or at least on a level of its own, for the eye can perceive more easily the distant slopes of the Slovene Alps than events in the valley below.

No doubt nerves were frayed after the sudden forced move from Cerkno. It was very cold. The German offensive was still in full swing. It had driven the Partizan command from the Trnovski gozd – Forest of Trnovo – up to Cerkno, then down to Šebrelje and Jagrice. Here there was hope of a temporary respite, though the offensive was not to peter out till later in the month of December.

Most of the *padalci* were present, including the first ISLD troika under Semolič; while Simčić, a demolitions expert rather than radio operator, had been sent off to guide a group of escaped Allied prisoners of war to HQ Slovenia. The parachutists had now been enrolled at their own request in the ranks of the Partizans; after all they were Slovenes; they had volunteered for the purpose of seeing their homeland joined to Slovenia as part of Jugoslavia; and they saw no reason to continue serving as members of the British forces. And the British, respecting their motives, did not try to prevent them.

The Partizan HQ, still called the Third Operational Zone, did not have a radio link to its own command at HQ Slovenia. This put it at a serious disadvantage, for in any war quick communications between commanders and troops on the ground are all-important. It had to rely on a network of couriers using *javke* or message posts. Though often praised by British officers in their reports for its extensiveness and efficiency, such a communications system was more suited to mediaeval than modern warfare; and, during an enemy offensive, could be interrupted altogether.

Great hopes had been aroused by the arrival in March of the Semolič mission, which had established a basis of confidence with the Partizans by allowing them to see the messages it sent and received. But, as already seen, it had had its own communications troubles, resulting from the non-arrival of its transmitter using accumulators, and it had been some weeks before it established communication with Cairo. At that time two Partizans had been sent into the Soča valley to steal an Italian army set, but this proved to be usable over only a very short distance.

Now, however, communications over the sets sent by the British with Darewski and the Slovene parachutists were operating more efficiently. Messages were being regularly exchanged with Cairo, except for times when the mission was on the run from an enemy attack. The thought occurred to the Partizan commanders: why not use the services of the *padalci* and the available sets to establish their own links with HQ Slovenia? If the British transmitters could operate over a distance as far as Egypt, here it was only a matter of 100 or 200 kilometres. How much simpler this would be!

During the stop in Šebrelje lively arguments arose leading, according to Krizmančič, to quarrelling among the *padalci*. Most said no, it was technically impossible. In that pre-electronic age, radio sets had to be equipped with crystals, delicate little instruments in miniature glass vacuum tubes, capable of transmitting and receiving only on certain determined wavelengths. The crystals they possessed were for wavelengths designed to cover long distances such as that to Cairo, not medium or short ones.

But Krizmančič and one other believed that it would be possible to modify the equipment for local communication. In general Krizmančič appears to have had a more accommodating character than his fellow *padalci*. He had had a difficult childhood and knew when one had to adapt oneself to circumstances. Born in 1919 in a village north of Rijeka, his family were too poor to bring him up, and he had been farmed out as a boy to work for smallholders some distance away, so that he could earn money to go to school and learn a trade. First he worked as a shepherd boy, then as baker and butcher.

While he and a local radio technician were left to tinker with the sets, the other parachutist operators were punished for their apparent obstinacy – or, as it seemed to their Partizan superiors, provocative obstructionism – by being put under arrest on orders of General Ambrožič. As Krizmančič noted, suspicions among the IX Corps staff about their motives had now been aroused.

Krizmančič believed that his efforts were moving towards success, but they never bore fruit, for the Germans appeared in strength and a general alarm was sounded. The parachutists were told that, if they wished to prove their loyalty, they must go and fight. They were sent out on patrols in the vanguard of the troops and, by all accounts, acquitted themselves well. Sever was wounded, but he was the only casualty. They were thereafter regarded as reliable enough to be dispersed as communications technicians among the Partizan units. Crayon mission was however without an operator, having got rid of Hammond, so Božič was loaned back to the British.

In recognition of the parachutists' proof of loyalty, most were admitted in January 1944 to membership of the Communist Party. For the moment, doubts about their trustworthiness had been laid to rest. The moment did not last long, however, for the commissar soon told them that they must not attend Party meetings any more. Even if not formally expelled from the Party, they were in fact suspended. Their good faith was once again in doubt.

8.
William In Wonderland

Darewski left for HQ Slovenia on 7 January, accompanied by Dušan Kveder – Tomaž. On arrival he found that he appeared to be under a cloud. As he wrote in his report, Darewski believed that tongues had been set wagging against him by Kveder, whom he regarded as basically unfriendly. „During our mutual time in Slovenia, I think he did most of the work to undermine our prestige, and definitely took every opportunity to crack at the British Empire on any excuse." On the other hand Darewski had taken immediately to Bebler: „He is a first-class man, and will do everything possible to help us". He also liked General Ambrožič, who had done a good job of work as a military commander already before coming to the corps and was „well disposed towards us".

As things turned out, the Partizans were formally to request Darewski's recall because of the „Gestapo incident" – though only after he had already left Slovenia. Darewski himself came to the conclusion that they did not want him because he had proved unable to deliver them any supplies of arms, equipment, clothing and food; this, after all, was their main interest in accepting missions from the capitalist West. Their need for supplies was particularly urgent when recruits flooded in, volunteers and conscripts, after Italy's surrender. The Partizans blamed him, so he thought, for „inefficiency and lack of effort". He believed that „the complete lack of any stores sorties in this area was the reason for the whole trouble".

In other words, the Gestapo incident was made up as an excuse to get rid of him. In commenting on the allegations that he was conspiring with their enemies, Darewski went no further than: „They concluded I was not working in their best interests." A very Anglo-Saxon understatement, from some one of Polish Jewish origin.

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Darewski had never met Major William Jones, DCM and Bar, the BLO at HQ Slovenia. Born in 1895, he was a veteran of the First World War, in which he gained his decorations as a non-commissioned officer and then went on to command a company. Jones had suffered multiple wounds, including the loss of an eye. By all the standards of conventional and unconventional warfare, it was a bizarre decision to parachute a man of his age and ignorance of the country to an operational guerrilla formation in occupied Europe. Jones was, furthermore, the first British SOE representative to reach the Jugoslav Partizans in the field; though, strictly speaking, he was not British but Canadian.

He and a British captain of ISLD, Anthony Hunter, parachuted near HQ Croatia on the night of 18/19 May 1943. This was a week before Captain Bill Deakin dropped as the first BLO from SOE to Tito's headquarters in Montenegro, while Fitzroy Maclean – promoted for the occasion to the rank of brigadier – followed as chief representative to Tito in September. Jones, after a short stay in Croatia, moved on to be the liaison officer with HQ Slovenia.

The blurb on a short book Jones later wrote of his experiences, entitled *Twelve Months with Titos Partizans*, says that on the outbreak of the Second World War he had met no success in his attempts to rejoin the Canadian forces, so went to England and managed to get a commission in the RAF, in the hope of becoming a fighter pilot. But he was too old. So he got himself transferred to a ground job in the armed forces in the Middle East where, hearing that the army needed parachutists, he transferred and went on a parachutists' course. His regiment in the British army, the Black Watch, was Scottish and photographs show him wearing a Scottish tam o'shanter instead of the normal British army headgear.

Jones was clearly a man of great determination. Yet how he got himself into SOE is a mystery. Perhaps the answer will one day be found in the SOE archives.

Eccentric and picturesque, Jones was a character drawn in two dimensions, like the hero of a boys adventure story. One dimension was great personal courage; the other, political gullibility reinforced by unbendable convictions. It is said that, on his arrival, some of the more doubting Partizans in their first contact with an envoy of the capitalist West believed that, inside the glass eye, was a miniature camera planted by the Intelligence Service. They soon changed their minds. For Jones espoused the Partizan cause, hook, line and sinker.

A devout Bible reader. Jones saw fellow Christians in the Communist-led Partizans. „Though he made little show of it, the spirit that penetrated the life of the Partizan was essentially and fundamentally religious zeal", he wrote in his book. The Partizan's „home training from childhood had been to fear God, and his knowledge of the principles of Jesus Christ was profound". The Partizans' political organisation, the Freedom Front, „was democracy at its best... There was no compulsion brought to bear upon anyone."

Such a personality could not fail to make a vivid impression. Maclean, who as head of the mission to Tito was his chief, wrote that „his powers of endurance and his spirited though at times somewhat unorthodox behaviour astonished all who met him". Deakin found the early signals Jones sent back to Cairo to be „disturbing in their wild and irresponsible enthusiasm". Stephen Clissold, who knew Jones and wrote an early biography of Tito, described him as an affable middle-aged gentleman, „a grizzled Canadian, brave as a lion and guileless as a child".

The Partizans were similarly impressed. Makso Šnuderl, who was on the staff at HQ Slovenia and lived in close contact with Jones, was astonished at the physical strength of this man aged 48 and at his calm in times of danger. In the forest they all hewed wood, for building huts and for providing fuel; Jones the Canadian cut down and brought in „ten times" as much as the others. „He's like a bear", Šnuderl commented in his diary. Then, during the German offensive that autumn after Italy's surrender, the headquarters staff had to hide for days in a bunker or underground shelter. Jones was always optimistic, managed to shave himself, did jobs like cleaning their cooking pans, etc. But, like a bear again, Jones reacted angrily when, on entering a hut, he overheard a US liaison officer refer to him as „an old son of a bitch". Jones immediately flew at the American and gave him „a sound box on the ears".

Jones's behaviour, between the Boy Scout and the cowboy, became altogether too controversial and he was recalled to base in April 1944. In Bari he continued to praise the

Partizans with enthusiasm and the writer recalls going to a lecture in which he spoke forcefully along these lines.

Jones wanted his own government to be fully informed about the Jugoslav resistance and on 5 May wrote from Bari to the Canadian Prime Minister, Mackenzie King, a nine-page letter which the British officer entrusted with forwarding it described as a „passionate appeal for the Partizan cause“. In it appears phrases such as: „The Partizan movement, properly called the Freedom Front, is essentially and in every respect a people's movement. National in scope, united in purpose, truthful and religious in nature, determined in effort, fearless in spirit...“ A few pages later: „True, the Communists are the strongest single party, but to say that party, or any leader of that party, are endeavouring to manipulate affairs to serve an ulterior motive is absolute nonsense and provocative propaganda.“

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This was the man with whom Darewski was to spend a month before he could be evacuated for relocation. From the gist of his signals in the previous autumn, he was fed up and feeling restless at IX Corps, it is evident that he was looking forward to meeting Jones; on 12 November he had suggested travelling to discuss briefly with him, before being evacuated and then returning to the IX Corps area, where „I have many used contacts with the staff, etc.“ This was hardly the tone of a man who felt vulnerable to accusations of links with the Gestapo.

But Jones at HQ Slovenia had already been told of rumours circulating about Darewski's conduct at Cerkno and never thought of questioning them. Though the two men were both of the same rank, major, Jones considered himself the superior as British representative with the HQ for all Slovenia. The order for Darewski to leave IX Corps and report to HQ Slovenia had not, incidentally, come directly from Cairo but via Jones.

On arrival at HQ Slovenia Darewski wanted to see the Partizan commanders to enquire about the rumours concerning him. Jones however told him he was just „small fry“, and would have to wait before being received by the commissar and the commander. Darewski did wait, for three days, then his patience gave up and he requested an interview on his own initiative. As he related in his report, he was received immediately; only to asked why he had been around for three days and not tried to see them.

When Darewski raised the subject of the rumours about him, he was told openly that reports had been received from the Primorska alleging contacts with the Gestapo; therefore they intended to request his removal „in conjunction with Jones“. Darewski commented: „It was now obvious to me that Jones was in sympathy with the Partizan side and not with me.“

The two quarrelled about the use of the mission's radio. Darewski wrote that he asked Jones several times to let him send signals to Cairo over his radio, but refused, using as the excuse that the Partizans had cut him off the air. This was a deliberate lie. He went off the air on his own bloody-mindedness in direct opposition to the wishes of the Partizans.

After his evacuation, Darewski had some more digs at Jones in his report. On arrival in the Primorska the previous August he and his party „were well received, but owing to lack of

cooperation by the British Mission Officer at HQ Slovenia (were) treated with great initial mistrust“. Then, referring to the situation in late September, „no stores had been received other than those dropped with the ISLD (MI6) personnel. I learned later that all our August/September and November sorties had been cancelled by Jones, who did not deem it necessary to inform me.“

Yet, for all Jones's faults, this accusation was unfounded. Examination of the messages exchanged between Crayon and base show that there was a period between the beginning of November and the third week of December when communications were defective or non-existent. For at least part of this time Darewski was on the run, between the flight from Cerkno and the petering out of the German offensive. Base – during that period moving from Cairo to Bari – continued to send him messages, while Darewski managed to send some out. The messages from base make clear beyond doubt that some supplies were prepared for Crayon. For example, on 1 November a sortie was standing by to be dropped at Quisca; though it is unclear why this point was chosen, as Quisca is the Italian name of Kojsko in the Collio (Brda) area north-west of Gorizia, which would have been too far out of Darewski's reach even if conditions had been quiet. Then on 12 November, sorties to Crayon were „on highest priority“. On 14 November two planeloads were still on high priority and instructions were sent that Simčič should stand by nightly until they were received. On 17 November a mysterious signal said Livingstone III was due to be dropped – mysterious because no other mention of such a mission has been found.

Later, on 21 December, base complained to Crayon that it had „had no contact for six weeks“. Presumably Darewski never received these messages (including the one mentioned earlier about his mother's death?); even if he did, the enemy's activities would have made drops difficult. Whatever happened, however, Jones is cleared of blame on this particular point.

Darewski returned to base in the New Year, an embittered man; he had made an enemy of his colleague at HQ Slovenia; been evacuated under a supposed cloud; and had failed to achieve the objective, set out in his instructions, of arranging supplies to the Partizans.

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Darewski's next assignment was altogether more congenial. He dropped on the night of 7 August 1944, along with another British officer, a Captain Flyght, and two radio operators to Italian Partizans in the Langhe area of southern Piedmont. These were non-communist Partizans. Here were none of the frustrations, mistrust, and suspicions that had thwarted his mission in the Primorska. The Italian Partizans were friendly and willing to accept direction from the British – General Alexander, commander-in-chief of the 15th Army Group in Italy, considered them as coming under his overall command. Major Temple – this was the cover name that Darewski was given – had the task of coordinating their resistance and organising supplies.

The Italians liked him; he was immediately *simpatico*. Though his knowledge of the language was still sketchy, the *simpatia* was mutual. Italians who served with him noticed an entirely different side to his character than that of the apparently pernickety RAOC officer who meticulously set out in his Slovenia report all the items of kit and equipment needed by an officer with guerrillas, down to the last pair of socks and number of aspirin pills. One Italian commander found him „jovial, expansive, cordial. He is dark of hair and complexion, paunchy and has a communicative smile. The extremely mobile eyes are extraordinarily expressive, in spite of the thick lenses". Little wonder, then, that Darewski had quickly made friends when he ran into Ranzinger and other inhabitants at Cerkno.

Darewski enjoyed singing Partizan songs: he started immediately on landing by parachute, for his hosts greeted him with a song called „the ambassador has arrived", and he joined in. A member of the Italian reception party noted, as a curiosity, that the British were temporarily inconvenienced at the start of their mission, for they expressed an immediate desire for a cup of tea. An inexperienced lad prepared it by boiling half a packet at once, with the result that its laxative effect kept them immobile for the first three days.

Major Temple impressed people by moving around, visiting units, and by taking part in all activities, even guard duties. The Italians noted that he particularly enjoyed racing at high speed in one of their few motor cars round the tortuous country roads of the liberated territory. He was present at a meeting in the city hall of Alba, a town of about 30.000 inhabitants, when it was liberated for a few weeks in the autumn. At the end of October and beginning of November he spent a week in occupied Turin, the Piedmontese capital. Among those he met was a senior manager of Fiat, whose output of vehicles and equipment was of great military importance for the Axis forces in north Italy, but whose staff and workers were wavering in their support for them – Fiat workers had already participated in a strike in the previous March.

Sadly, Darewski's mission was to end abruptly. On 12 November 1944 he received a large supply drop from 15 aircraft. The Axis forces were already beginning an offensive sweep and soon the Partizans were forced to retreat. On the morning of 15 November Darewski was in Marsaglia, a typical hilltop village clustered round a mediaeval castle; though 600 metres high, the magnificent view across Mondovi and Cuneo to the sweep of the southern Alps gave the impression of not being isolated from the world. As the enemy closed in on the village, Darewski was one of the last to leave, jumping on the left side running board of a Partizan lorry laden with supplies. A peasant's ox-cart suddenly appeared out of a side road in front and, to avoid it, the driver swerved to the left, brushing against a wall. Darewski was knocked off and fell to the ground; he was driven to a hospital nearby, out of range of the enemy. It was immediately apparent that his injuries were serious and he died that afternoon of an internal haemorrhage.

Major Temple's memory lived on, and a commemorative plaque was unveiled to him in Marsaglia after the war, in autumn 1978. The village, like many in the hills and mountains in Italy, is much emptier of inhabitants than it was then. But the older ones who remain say the

accident took place just a few paces away from where the plaque has been placed on a rebuilt wall beside the road.

* * *

Jones became a living legend among the Partizans, whose leaders – at least the more blinkered Communists among them – believed that he later became victim of political persecution by the British. They could not help thinking that he was treated in a similar way to which Communists would treat one of their own deviationists from the Party line. This „Alice Through The Looking Glass" attitude is typified by remarks Edvard Kardelj made to a meeting of the Freedom Front leadership after the war, on 7 October 1945. Kardelj, the leading Slovene Communist and number two in the Jugoslav hierarchy to Tito – „an honest, sincere gentleman of noble purpose and high ideals" had been Jones's description – had just returned from an international conference of ministers in London. Kardelj gave the meeting an account of the conference, then according to Šnuderl's diary turned to talking about Jones, with the words, „Jones can only harm us, for he is such an enthusiast. What did they do to him! You get the real sight of English democracy, of inhuman reaction and dictatorship. They wanted to kill him, they sent him to Scotland to some division, there they interned him. Afterwards they sent him to India, he was already on the ship, but it could not set sail. He got ten days leave, but was not allowed home to Canada. He curses the British Empire. All the time an agent is behind him. The Intelligence Service confiscated his book about Jugoslavia."

His book may have run into delays about getting security clearance, but it was not suppressed and duly published in 1946. Jones retired to Canada, where he farmed – characteristically, he named his farm Belgrade – and worked on a fuller version of his memoirs; but, before they were completed, he died in September 1969.

9.
„Gate-crashers“

There was no handover in Crayon when Darewski was recalled. For several weeks the mission with IX Corps remained without a BLO. While Darewski had left IX Corps on 7 January 1944, his successor, Captain D. E. Davies of the Royal Artillery, set off from HQ Slovenia in the opposite direction two days later. He made the slow journey in the company of members of Clowder mission.

The latter, under Lieutenant Colonel Peter Wilkinson, were gate-crashers of a sort. They had not been made welcome by Major Jones when they passed through HQ Slovenia on Christmas Eve on their way to the Primorska from Bosnia. Jones, as Wilkinson wrote in a wartime autobiography, did not conceal his „justifiable annoyance“ at not being informed of their coming and decided against them being invited to the HQ Christmas dinner.

In a wider sense too they were gate-crashers in that their work had nothing to do with IX Corps or with SOE’s section dealing with Jugoslavia, and they had not been invited by local leaders. But then, in Partizan eyes many of the British and Slovenes sent by them were unwelcome guests. It was a constant complaint of Partizan commanders and, especially, commissars that so-and-so had not been given authorisation by Tito’s headquarters and thus should not be allowed to be with them. It mattered little to the Partizans that, under international law, the Primorska was still part of Italy and their jurisdiction was not recognised by the Allies; they considered it as already part of their homeland.

The two groups, taking days over a journey that now needs an hour or at most two, passed each other somewhere on the way without making contact. Davies however ran into Sergeant Hammond, who at that time was lying low and awaiting evacuation. When Davies reached IX Corps late in January he found that Darewski had destroyed his signals and records. The mission, as he wrote in his report at the end of his assignment, „consisted of a Slovene w/t operator, Božič, who was using a dilapidated B Mk I“ (an old type of set) „which the Cairo station could not hear“.

Davies had never expected to come to the Primorska and had not been briefed about it. For the last three months he had been kicking his heels at HQ Slovenia after dropping together with Marijan Fegec on 2 October as mission Flotsam, with the objective of moving north of the Sava river with a mission of his own into the Štajerska or Styria. The spirit in which Major Jones had received them is not difficult to imagine. Davies wrote that the BLO at HQ Slovenia – he nowhere mentions him by name – would not agree to a move northward. The BLO took the line that he had had no instructions about them „and considered us reinforcements“. Base at Bari had in any case failed to send a promised radio operator for Flotsam, „so my party was incomplete“. Not surprisingly Jones, when some of his own equipment was damaged, took over Davies's radio transmitter, signals plan and crystals, and his mission was henceforth known as Flotsam.

In mid-February Davies, by now installed at IX Corps, received a transmitter that had been dropped with other supplies, so at least his communications problem at Crayon was overcome. But life continued to be „rather difficult“. There was no competent interpreter at the corps headquarters. Božič was kept busy for most of the day at his wireless set, and was unable to both operate it and do cipher work. The corps commander, General Ambrožič, would not hear of Hammond being allowed to return. This meant that Davies himself had to do all the enciphering and deciphering and, as he put it, he was kept chained to the w/t set.

For a time Božič was operating from a farmhouse at Čepovan while Davies was quartered in another house about 50 yards away. Čepovan, in a wide valley between high hills, offered a good site for a dropping field a kilometre or two to the north, which was regularly used for sending both supplies and people. A tablet commemorating these parachute operations has been placed in recent years on a rock there, together with some remains of a shot down Allied aeroplane.

After the dearth during Darewski's time, some supplies now began to come in: ten sorties were received in March and April. The Partizans went over to the attack and in April laid siege, though unsuccessfully, to the small town of Idrija, lying in a hill valley that contained a strategically important mercury mine. In late June/early July the railway line connecting Austria to north-east Italy via Jesenice, Bled and the Soča valley was successfully sabotaged in a planned offensive in which the *padalec* Valter Gorjanc was killed; he had been dropped nine months before as one of Tennyson (or Livingstone 1?) mission, together with Šuligoj. Davies believed that the Partizans in these operations would have been able to do more damage if they had received more explosives.

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Davies obviously got on well with the Partizans and gave them a good write-up in the report on his mission, without being blind to their negative side. He was no Major Jones. He made clear that their movement was controlled by the Communist Party which, he noted, had already existed as an underground organisation before the war and provided the hard core of resistance. The Partizan forces were guerrillas, which meant that they had all the limitations of such forces compared to regularly organised and equipped troops. He criticised the Partizans for being unduly secretive about the strengths and dispositions of their forces and, when they did give figures, these were inflated and should not be taken at their face value.

But „relations between Corps HQ and the British Mission have always been very friendly“ (echoing what Darewski had written, despite the allegations brought against him). Though the corps commissar was a Communist and conceited about the Partizans, the corps commander, Major-General Lado Ambrožič – Novljan, was „a very friendly, helpful person, immensely popular with all ranks. Good disciplinarian. Unperturbed in difficult situations.“

His staff in Davies's opinion were efficient and worked together in remarkable harmony, though he thought that at all levels they were too frightened to take decisions, which had to be referred to higher authority. Discipline was „good, possibly a little too keen“. Davies

emphasised that these were no conventional troops, „but an odd mixture of young and old, war-weary and enthusiastic amateurs, capably led, willing to fight, but with considerable limitations“. Morale was high, though there had been some desertions. Yet, „clothed in rags, badly shod, poorly armed, a sufficient but dull unchanging diet, louse-infested, little or no entertainment, it is really astonishing that anyone has enough courage to fight“. His opinions are worth comparing with those of Major Gibbon.

Though the Communists among the population were probably no more than 20 per cent, the people gave full support to the Partizan movement. „After more than 20 years of Italian Fascism“, Davies commented, „it is only reasonable to suppose that the people would support any movement which promises democracy“.

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For all his easy personal relations and balanced opinions, Davies was not in the driving seat for the first part of his five month stay with IX Corps. In his report he had groused about having to spend most of his time chained to the w/t set, but he did not give the full picture. He was elbowed to one side and the steering wheel was taken over by Clowder.

Clowder was a high-level mission entrusted with a very delicate, secret brief; to foment anti-Nazi resistance inside the Reich itself. And the obvious point of penetration was the Reich's soft underbelly, Austria, which it was thought could most easily be approached from Jugoslavia. The mission's officers were men of high calibre; they had to be.

The head, Lieutenant Colonel Peter Wilkinson, came from a middle-class military family, of the sort that made the British Empire what it once was. He received an appropriate education at Rugby and Cambridge university; Rugby is a well-known public – which to the British means private – school and gave its name to oval-balled football. In later life Wilkinson ended a distinguished diplomatic career as ambassador in Vienna, and after that served in the confidential and sensitive post of coordinator of intelligence at the British government's cabinet office.

His number two in Clowder was a close friend, Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard, a determined and irrepressible figure who among many accomplishments was a skilled radio operator. The mission also had a radio expert in Sergeant Major George Hughes but, in view of Prichard's talents, it was decided that his presence would not be necessary at IX Corps and he was left behind at HQ Slovenia.

Prichard, while under Wilkinson in London, had been involved in organising one of SOE's most spectacular coups, the assassination in May 1942 of „Reichsprotektor“ Reinhardt Heydrich, the governor in occupied Prague and one of the chiefs in the Nazi security service. When in Cairo, while preparing for Clowder, Prichard had been given the cover name of Squadron Leader Cahusac, and as Major Cahusac he has often been referred to by Slovenes. Later Prichard was to be accompanied by a group of Partizans into Austria, not from the IX Corps area but from north-east Slovenia, reaching the Saualpen mountain east of Klagenfurt. Prichard's mission came to a tragic end: a last radio message was received from him in

December 1944, after which he disappeared without trace. Conditions were extreme; hard winter, no shelter, no support from the local population. Was he killed by the enemy or by Partizans who found his presence too burdensome?

Wilkinson was in SOE, but he answered directly to London, bypassing the SOE chain' of authority in the Mediterranean. He has described these events in a readable wartime autobiography. Before starting out he took care to get on good terms with Fitzroy Maclean as head of SOE's missions to the Partizans (now referred to in signals as Macmis), then called on Tito in Bosnia and obtained his blessing (and an autographed photograph). From there Wilkinson, Prichard and Hughes made their way to HQ Croatia, thence in December 1943 to HQ Slovenia. Even before arrival in Slovenia Wilkinson had heard that Jones was „getting rather outside his brackets as according to all accounts he has become a rabid Slovenian nationalist". When they met, Jones displayed what Wilkinson described as „paranoid suspicions" that he was plotting to supplant him.

It was a Partizan leader at HQ Slovenia who suggested that the IX Corps area would be the best springboard for infiltrating Austria. As Davies was due to take up his post as BLO to IX Corps, they all travelled together. Wilkinson did not take to Davies. He was „a red faced young Welshman, whose lack of social graces as well as his total ignorance of any language but English (and possibly Welsh) made him an awkward travelling companion". Wilkinson's attitude was perhaps coloured by a touch of social snobbery, common enough in England in those times.

On arrival Wilkinson and Prichard took over the shop, so to speak. They persuaded General Ambrožič that their own channel of supply, via SOEs separate organisation for north Italy (No. 1 Special Force), would be more efficient than those through the regularly accredited BLOs of Macmis; the general may have needed little persuasion, considering Darewski's failure to send them anything the previous autumn. None the less, Wilkinson admitted, it was „a shameless piece of salesmanship" and bad luck on Davies, who was unable to take part in their discussions as he spoke neither German nor Italian. Prichard immediately transmitted to London over his own small transmitter a shopping list of their requirements.

At that time they were not in Čepovan but quartered comfortably in a house on a hill above Cerkno. Before a drop could be received, the alarm sounded early one morning and the staff made them move quickly further up the hill. They were told that a German police battalion was entering the town. This presumably was the famous – or infamous – surprise attack on 27 January in which 48 people including young Party cadres were killed and after which the surviving members of the Ranzinger group were executed. It became known as one of the most bitter defeats suffered by the Slovene Partizans.

For the time being, Wilkinson wrote, Davies appeared content to leave supply arrangements in Prichard's hands: and supplies duly came, in spite of fears of German attacks that kept everyone frequently on the move during those days. A successful sortie was made on 14 February by aircraft serving SOE in north Italy. Among other items it brought for Clowder a spare radio transmitter. This was the set that enabled Davies to get back regularly on the air; Clowder lent it to him.

Wilkinson's intention was to spy out the lie of the land northwards into Austria, then return to London to report, leaving Prichard behind. On 6 February he set out on a difficult reconnaissance, in the mid-winter snow of the Alps, getting as far as a

point just north of Lake Bohinj before bad weather forced him back; this was in Slovene territory but had been occupied and annexed by Germany and thus ranked at that time as being inside the Reich.

Back at IX Corps HQ, he left again on 17 February, bound for Istria. The plan had been for a British submarine to take him off from a rendezvous on the west coast of Istria. But the Partizans never informed him, and British Intelligence surprisingly appeared not to know, that the western coast of Istria was populated as much if not more by Italians as by Slavs. When this became apparent, the submarine scheme had therefore to be cancelled but Wilkinson, skirting in a semi-circle around and behind Trieste, went to have a look at Istria all the same. Here he came across a young German prisoner taken by an Istrian Partizan detachment. The lad had been encouraged by being told that he would be enrolled in their 13th battalion, little knowing that this meant he was doomed. Wilkinson then made his way to HQ Slovenia and evacuation.

Soon after arriving in Italy Wilkinson was summoned to London, where he was received by people in high places including General Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff. While in England he wrote a long report on the situation in Slovenia. The report, consisting of 152 paragraphs with appendices, aroused considerable interest in the government and was published after the war. It is a lucid, in-depth account and assessment of what he saw and heard during, as he put it, a 1.500 mile long walk in western Jugoslavia; many of the facts being supplied – he pays tribute to him for this in his autobiography – by his interpreter Florjan.

Wilkinson described the Slovene Partizans' objective as a free and democratic Slovenia. While they supported participation in a free and federated Jugoslavia, he was years before his time in stating – as is now generally accepted – that they were in reality part of central Europe and not the Balkans. Stressing the warmth with which he was personally received everywhere, he showed himself sympathetic and favourable to the Slovene cause. In many down-to-earth observations about the Partizans as a fighting force, Wilkinson's views were close to those of Major Gibbon. Both, after all, were regular officers. Except for a backbone of experienced leaders, Wilkinson saw the Slovene soldier as essentially an amateur. He described the system of dual command and, like Gibbon, gave a high rating to senior commanders but, with few exceptions, a low one to commissars, especially junior ones. He mentioned, as Gibbon did, the problem of desertions, but pointed out that this mainly arose after Italy's collapse when the Partizans introduced a policy of mobilising people of military age. Partizan efforts to get escaped Allied prisoners of war to fight in their ranks had met with little success; but while Gibbon pointed out that a good guerrilla needed to know the countryside, Wilkinson was struck by the fact that many of them were in poor physical condition. Among Slovene recruits, Wilkinson further noted, some had joined to escape being called up by the enemy, or because their homes had been burned down. Like other BLOs, Wilkinson was impressed by the Partizan

courier service; and, like other BLOs too, he had high praise for the civilian population, for their support and spirit of sacrifice.

Prichard had stayed behind and was with Davies till leaving on 27 April for the north-east and his fatal entry in the autumn into Austria. By now, according to Wilkinson, Davies had become resentful of Prichard's ease in getting drops via Number 1 Special Force and of his close relations with General Ambrožič.

More and more British and British-sponsored people were now arriving, often at the dropping zone in Čepovan. Among the Partizans, from HQ Slovenia downwards, the feeling grew that they were becoming too many and friction arose over whether they had proper clearance for their arrival from the Partizan HQs for Jugoslavia or for Slovenia. Two Anglo-Austrian agents dropped by parachute to join Hesketh-Prichard. These and others of Austrian origin whom Clowder planned to employ inside Austria proved of little or no use and became a cause of embarrassment to Prichard; later, when on their way in north Slovenia, one was captured by the Germans and turned traitor, giving away valuable information.

Wilkinson meanwhile turned his attention for penetrating the Reich to Carnia, the Italian alpine area north of Friuli adjoining Austria, on the eastern edge of the Dolomites. He found the Italian Partizans more accommodating than the Slovenes and he was able to set up a network of BLOs and Austrian agents. But here too his success across the Austrian border was limited.

At IX Corps, arrivals by parachute included, in May 1944, Major Nigel Watson of ISLD, accompanied by Josip Dolenc, a Slovene from Trieste; and, on 10 June, Major A. G. Wood of the Royal Engineers, who came to relieve Davies, with a British radio operator. Perhaps Davies's assignment had only been intended as temporary; he was able to depart for HQ Slovenia and evacuation on 2 July.

* * *

Gate-crashers of another sort, and much more numerous, soon followed Wilkinson into Carnia. On 20 July – by coincidence, the day of a failed assassination attempt by German conspirators against Hitler – a first trainload of Cossacks arrived from central Europe, the advance guard of many more during the summer and autumn.

The Nazis were implementing a promise made the previous year to allow the Cossacks a home in Western Europe, until victory over the Soviet Union would enable them to return to their homelands and enjoy independence. On 10 November 1943 Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel as Chief of Staff of the German High Command and Alfred Rosenberg as Reichsminister for the eastern territories had signed a declaration, which among other promises said, „If the circumstances of war do not permit you to enter the land of your forefathers, we will organise your life as Cossacks in Western Europe under the protection of the Fuehrer, giving you land and all that is necessary for your existence".

Carnia was the land the Germans decided to allocate. An eastern propagation of the Dolomites, it was not of great military or industrial importance, and the Germans would not

be greatly troubled should Italian Partizans establish in it areas of liberated territory. But immediately to the east was the railway linking Austria with Italy along the line Villach – Tarvisio – Udine. This was of strategic value and Carnia could offer a good base from which to protect this line of communication.

The inhabitants of this remote mountain area thus found themselves in the unusual situation of still in theory being subjects of Italy, for Mussolini in the rump of his Fascist republic based on Lake Garda had never renounced sovereignty. In practice however they were ruled by the Germans, who after the Italian surrender of 8 September 1943 had proclaimed all north-east Italy to be under their control as the *Adriatisches Kuestenland* or Adriatic Coastland. But on the spot they were swamped by Cossacks and Caucasians.

Kosakenland in Norditalien was a strange and pathetic throwback to years gone by. There were elderly Tsarist officers who had fought the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution, like the Cossacks' commander, the 76-year-old General Piotr Nikolayevich Krasov and others who had spent the time between the two world wars in exile in Paris or Berlin. Under them were former Soviet officers and men who had been taken prisoner by the Germans, or had deserted, or who had simply been living in the territories occupied by the Germans. They brought with them the paraphernalia of the past – operetta-type uniforms and headgear, flashing swords, imperial banners, and Orthodox icons that to the concern of the parish priests were displayed in Roman Catholic churches. The life of the local people was indeed submerged; the village of Alesso became officially known as Novocherkassk, Cavazzo Carnico as Krasnodar, Trasaghis as Novorossiysk and so on.

Their strength was put at about 20.000 fighting men with nearly as many cavalry horses and pack animals, even including 50 camels. It was an army such as the great Russian novelist Tolstoy might have described: no motorised units or tanks, but an enormous encumbrance of some 17.000 camp followers of both sexes, and baggage trains emitting an ever-present smell of horse dung and urine. They set up the trappings of civil life centred on Tolmezzo, the main town of Carnia; a school with eight classes, a printing press that published a newspaper, a *Feldbank* or mobile bank with iron safes, and song and dance groups.

Also in the area were units from the Caucasus and Soviet Central Asia, numbering about 5.000 soldiers. They were independent of the Cossacks, but similarly served under overall German command.

During the autumn and winter the Cossacks and Caucasians fanned out well beyond Carnia, eastwards as far as Kobarid and Bovec in the upper Soca valley, and south-east down to Gorizia and the Vipava valley. Units of IX Corps thus had occasion to clash with them. In Carnia itself their massive presence inevitably damped down the scale of Italian Partizan operations. Wilkinson, whose progress had been disappointing, had little alternative but to evacuate his missions during the autumn.

The Cossacks stayed in their home-from-home till the very last days of the war. Then they were ordered to retreat north into the Reich and on the way had a bloody engagement with Italian Partizans before reaching Austria. Their subsequent fate – consignment of most

of them by the British to the Soviets – has been the subject of a well-publicised court case in London and is thus better known in the English-speaking world.

10.
Pride And Shame

In photographs of a group of people at IX Corps headquarters in that summer of 1944, one obviously British officer stands out; tall, seemingly a little stiff, wearing British army regulation shorts as issued in the Middle East — the only person with bare knees. He can scarcely have been other than Major Wood who, accompanied by Corporal Collins as his radio operator, dropped by parachute at Čepovan on the night of 9/10 June 1944 to take over from Davies. As things turned out, Wood's assignment was even shorter than that of Davies. Wood was evacuated „for medical reasons“ – his report does not give further details – from the area of HQ Slovenia after only three months, in the night of 9/10 September.

This time there was no question of gaps between successive BLOs at Crayon. Davies did not leave for HQ Slovenia till three weeks after Wood's arrival, on 2 July; and then Captain Hugh Gibb arrived by parachute to relieve Wood on 31 August, ten days before the latter's departure. Since mid-July there had also been a strong Soviet military mission at IX Corps under Lieutenant Colonel Ivan Petrovich Ribachenko.

Wood, in common with other BLOs then and later, complained about Partizan attempts to put him in cotton wool. He disliked being kept so far away from operations, about which he was only informed after they had taken place. He was also annoyed that the Partizans would not let him, or any one from ISLD, interrogate captured prisoners of war; this, he pointed out in his report, meant the loss of a great deal of intelligence that would have been valuable to the Allies. Nevertheless during his relatively brief stay he was allowed to see at close quarters the last stage of the four-day Partizan offensive, mentioned by Davies, against the railway leading from southern Austria to north-east Italy through the Soča valley. Indeed, he nearly came too close to the scene of action, for during the last night, 2/3 July, corps headquarters was strongly counter-attacked and a group of 200 to whom Wood was attached was ambushed and lost 12 dead.

The offensive, directed by General Ambrožič together with Dušan Kveder, was generally successful, and drew praise from Allied commanders including General Maitland Wilson, commander-in-chief in the Middle East; for it blocked for several months one of the Germans' lines of supply to their army in Italy and thus was of direct value to the Anglo-Americans trying to push up the Italian peninsula. The Western Allies had recently opened the second front in France, and it was also of indirect benefit to them for enemy forces to be tied down in distant areas like this.

The Partizan operation focused on the stretch of railway running along the valley of the small Baška River, from the line's emergence from a tunnel in the Slovene Alps south of Bohinjska Bistrica down to near the confluence of the Baška with the Soča. Wood reported that the whole of this line (on the map, about 16 kilometres) was put out of action. Sixty-two craters were blown in retaining walls supporting the track; eight bridges were destroyed; and four mixed German and Italian Fascist garrisons were overcome.

The Germans did not take this lying down. They struck back with a counter-offensive against IX Corps which, according to Wood's report. began on 19 July and was not called off till 11 August.

Evidently a more sensitive person than the photographs might suggest, Wood was struck both by the ragged clothing and poor equipment of the Partizan soldiers – as Davies had been – and by Bari's inadequacy in supplying what his mission requested for them. His personal feelings „alternated between pride and shame; pride in our efforts to clothe and arm these people to aid them carry on their fight for life in the only way they considered it worth living; shame that in the small final details which indicated thought, care and organisation we so often failed", he wrote in his report.

He speculated what might happen after the war. Once the Germans were gone, the Partizans „will commence the slaughter of those of their own people who have fought against them and been guilty of atrocities. As these must number many thousands, Jugoslavia can, if left to itself, expect its own private war to continue for at least two years". His words were not so wide of the mark, though he could not have foreseen that certain events would still leave an open sore in Slovene public life over half a century later; events such as the postwar killing in Kočevski Rog in southern Slovenia of several thousand Domobranci and collaborationists, many of whom had been handed over from captivity as enemy prisoners of war in Austria by the British to the Jugoslav authorities.

Wood ended his report with a point made also by other BLOs. „I liked the rank and file and junior officers, in fact all officers, but regret they were not more open and helpful as far as military matters and intelligence were concerned."

* * *

Two outside events at that time contributed towards clouding the atmosphere in which British missions worked in the Primorska. Firstly, the prime minister, Winston Churchill, met Marshal Tito on 12 and 13 August in Naples, and during their talks Churchill brought up the subject of a possible Allied landing at the head of the Adriatic. Tito, according to British accounts, reacted positively to the idea. Stephen Clissold, present as an interpreter, quoted him in his biography as saying: „Yes, we have our troops in Slovenia and Croatia who would certainly assist."

Perhaps there was misunderstanding, for it later became clear that the Partizan leadership would by no means welcome a landing by Anglo-American forces on territory in Istria or in the Trieste area; on the contrary, they would oppose it, since this was territory that they regarded as theirs by right. Already the year before, on 30 November 1943, AVNOJ – the Partizans' forerunner of a future parliament –had passed a resolution annexing to Jugoslavia the parts of Italy where there was a Slovene or Croat population, including the Primorska and Istria. The furthest the Partizans would be prepared to go would be to grant the Allies facilities to use the port of Trieste for their supplies in an advance into Austria. This fear of a British landing in Istria without their consent was to crop up in all kinds of reports and reminiscences

by Jugoslav leaders. Churchill certainly toyed with the idea of an outflanking operation on the eastern side of the Adriatic, in Istria or Dalmatia, that would aim towards central Europe through the Ljubljana gap, the historical route through which invaders had marched on Italy in the reverse direction. Wilkinson in his autobiography makes clear that, when called to report after his evacuation at the Allied HQ in Italy and in London, he found British commanders keen on the idea, and planning went ahead. Fortunately the plan was later called off, for the terrain would have been prohibitive for a modern fighting force. The Anglo-Americans were not light-footed and flexible like the Partizans.

The second event was the despatch by the OSS – the US counter-part to SOE – in August 1944 of two missions to Mihailović's Četnik headquarters in Serbia. The first mission, named Halyard, has been little publicised and arrived under Lieutenant George Musulin in Serbia on 2 August. Its direct objective was to arrange evacuation of shot down US Air Force fliers, though Musulin and his successor, Lieutenant Nick Lalich, did meddle in political matters by speaking on separate occasions in public in favour of the cause of Mihailović and his, as they called them, Nationalists. Halyard under Lalich remained with the Četniks till its evacuation from Bosnia on 27 December 1944. The second group, more widely known about, was an intelligence mission called Ranger under Lieutenant-Colonel Robert McDowell who remained with Mihailović from 26 August till 1 November. He had hopes of penetrating further into central and south-east Europe, and actually engaged in contacts with a German emissary about a possible German surrender. A readable account by Dr Biber, the Partizan historian, of the McDowell mission's conception, activities and termination has been published in the US, while Lalich has recounted his experiences in a Serbian expatriate magazine. By the autumn Mihailović was on the run in Bosnia, though he deluded himself that he could return to Serbia with the support of the people, and the Halyard mission members shared with him conditions of considerable hardship and hunger.

The British had already withdrawn their last liaison officers with the Četniks in the spring of 1944, and had made known to the Partizans that they no longer considered the Četniks to be actively on the Allied side. The Americans had acted behind the British back. Churchill was furious, and protested to President Roosevelt – „If we each back different sides, we lay the scene for a fine civil war", he wrote –with the result that both missions were ordered to withdraw, though they took their time to do so. By then the Soviet army was in Belgrade and the missions had lost their military importance. To the Partizan command, however, the picture looked all too clear; the Western Allies were playing a double game and this underlying suspicion was reflected from then on in dealings with BLOs.

11.
The Volunteers

The *padalci* or Slovene volunteers played a valuable role in the common effort. The earliest prepared the way for British missions. They provided back-up for them and the Partizans in establishing radio links; undertook sabotage and trained Partizans in it; and, in the early stages, helped to gather intelligence. But for them, British support for resistance to the Axis in the Primorska would not have got off the ground so soon or so effectively.

The assignments and despatch of the padalci were subjected to political infighting behind the scenes. There was the Jugoslav government-in-exile in London, which naturally wanted to influence and as far as possible control events in the home country. Inside Jugoslavia there were the Četniks of Draža Mihailović, who were given credit (often inaccurately) for the earlier resistance against the Germans; and there were their bitter enemies the Partizans, about whom the British at first knew little, but to whom they came round to give their sole support. Among the Allies, too, there was dissent between policy makers from different countries, and between government departments in London; rivalries and quarrels between nominally friendly bodies and organisations; and clashes of opinion inside SOE itself (and probably inside ISLD). These various bodies understandably wanted their own trusted agents inside occupied countries, with whom they could be in communication and who could provide information. But political considerations were above the heads of most *padalci*; they were motivated by patriotism.

Relatively little mention is made of the *padalci* in BLO's reports. This is understandable, considering that most applied to join the Partizans, or the JANL (Jugoslav Army of National Liberation) as it was increasingly referred to in reflection of the Partizans' objective of transforming themselves from a guerrilla movement into a national army. The British did not stand in the way of the parachutists, recognising that as patriots they wished to serve under their own people.

How many were they, in the Primorska, or in Slovenia? We do not know; many files are incomplete, or destroyed or still sealed. More than 20 were sent to Slovenia; the accepted but tentative Slovene view is 29; perhaps they exceeded 30. Many were soon dispersed to units in the field, or lost sight of. The adventures of a few, about whom details are more easily obtainable, merit description.

Ivo Božič, Stanko Simčič and Cvetko Šuligoj, already met in these pages, were all alive and active at the end of the 20th century; in journalistic jargon they might be called the Three SOE Musketeers. Born respectively in 1920, 1916 and 1915, they had a life-long friendship. Another was Ciril Kobal, who was with ISLD. Born in 1920, he was living in retirement at the turn of the century in Koper. A Slovene from the *karst* behind Trieste, Kobal was involved as a young man in the TIGR movement. His wartime career had followed a slightly different course, for ISLD after the usual parachute and other training sent him on his own by sea as mission Jane to the islands of northern Dalmatia, where he did sterling work in radioing back

intelligence about enemy dispositions and shipping. While there he decided in October 1944 to transfer from British to Jugoslav service: to be consistent with this decision, he returned to Bari, handed back his radio set and went back to Dalmatia at the disposal of the Partizans. Though a Slovene, his area of operation was in Croatia.

Šuligoj, after being wounded in September 1943, was out of action in a Partizan hospital for some time, but was able to take part in further operations during the war. After the war he and his family owned a grocers shop in Gorizia, just on the Italian side of the border.

Simčič and Božić were chosen early on for possible infiltration into northern Jugoslavia, as part of the efforts to ascertain what resistance movements there were and how they could be supported. Before dropping in mission Livingstone 1 they had gone together with Bill (later Sir William) Deakin to Malta in March 1943, on a reconnaissance to investigate the possibility of being landed by submarine somewhere in Istria or in the Trieste area. Was it to be west of Trieste towards Monfalcone? Or on the west coast of Istria between Punta Salvore and Pola? Or, as Božić believes, on the east coast of Istria, in the Gulf of Quarnaro? The question has little relevance, for the promised submarine – according to Božič's recollection, it would have been Polish – did not materialise, apparently being needed for duties elsewhere. Simčič and Božič also pointed out that in their opinion it would be a madcap venture. It is strange how ignorant British wartime intelligence appears to have been about Istria: particularly that it had a considerable native Italian – and thus potentially unfriendly – population, especially along the coast. As has been seen, it persisted in this error a year later by planning a submarine rendezvous in Istria for Peter Wilkinson of Clowder. The project was fortunately dropped and Deakin, Simčič and Božič returned to Cairo.

The exchanges, contained in PRO files, between SOE in Cairo and in London during 1942/43 on prospects and preparations for infiltrating agents into Slovenia throw a sidelight on British assessments of the little group of volunteers they had collected, including Simčič and Božič and the reasons for choosing them. Simčič, then a senior NCO in the Italian army, „had got himself taken prisoner by Australians in Tobruk on 20 January 1941". He was considered of „very good character, good health, quick and conscientious". Božić, taken prisoner at Bardia in Libya in November 1940, was „keen and quick, reliable and a good patriot".

Simčič's expertise was in sabotage. After Italy's surrender in September 1943 he had done demolition work on roads and bridges in the Gorizia-Monfalcone area. A large number of escaped Allied prisoners of war were then flowing in to Partizan units and, as he spoke some English, he was detailed to guide a party of about 70 – Britons, Australians and New Zealanders – to safer territory in the interior of Slovenia. The group relied for their journey on guides and couriers, each responsible for a sector of country that he knew well. They managed to cross the main Ljubljana – Trieste road and railway lines, heavily guarded by collaborationist forces as well as Germans; but at a certain point the guide for the next stage failed to turn up. They were famished; shooting could be heard not far away; after waiting, Simčič decided they must push on, on their own. „I must admit that the Allied soldiers behaved in a very disciplined way, obeying my instructions", he recalled. They stumbled on an outpost of Partizan 14th

division, which fortunately did not open fire. The commander asked how they had managed to find the way. „Partizan luck“, Simčič replied.

Afterwards Simčič served as demolitions and sabotage instructor at a school for training NCOs and then one for training officers. Now an officer himself in the JANL, he was sent to run a demolitions course for some 20 soldiers with the Lackov *odred* (detachment) in Štajerska (Slovene Styria), not far from the old border with Austria, which since 1938 had been incorporated in the German Reich. His students were mostly Slovenes mobilised into the German armed forces who had deserted.

He relates that at the end of the course he decided they should have a practical test rather than a normal exam. They moved across the border into Austria, to a point between the small towns of Spielfeld and Ehrenhausen on the railway line from Graz via Leibnitz to Maribor in the valley of the Mura river; „as far away as possible from the frontier, so as to avoid any German reprisals against a Slovene population“. The line was used by the Germans to supply their forces in Croatia and Serbia.

Under cover of night Simčič and his party hollowed out ballast and placed explosive – „British gelignite, together with a booby trap detonator“ –under the track near a small station, where the trains always went slowly even if they did not stop. Nearby was a mill with a millwheel and a bridge across a stream that offered a good getaway. The first night no train passed. On the second night, after relaying the explosive:

> We moved back a short distance to a meadow, and buried ourselves in a haystack, where it was not so cold. We had nearly dozed off when we heard a train puffing up from the direction of Leibnitz. We listened carefully. Suddenly there was a terrible bang and crashing of wagons, cries for help. You could hear it all very well, for we were not much more than 50 metres from the „accident“. We beat a hasty retreat and hid in a hill nearby, till day came.

They spent the day lying up and in the evening went down to the nearest village:

> Where we overheard people talking about a train off the rails and partly overturned, also about carriages with „soldaten“, and that there were many dead and wounded, perhaps as many as over 300. I did not see any myself. That evening we helped ourselves to tobacco that had just been delivered to the tobacconist and went back to the detachment.

With the same group he tried two more operations, but the line was by then too well guarded.

That was Simčič's story. It was the night of 15 December 1944. His unit's headquarters, in its fortnightly operational report, first said Allied aircraft on 12 December strafed a military train on the Slovene side of the border, destroying the engine and several coaches. Then on 15 Dec, on the line near Leibnitz towards Ehrenhausen, a „sappers group mined the railway line. A military transport was derailed, with approximately 160 soldiers killed and a considerable number wounded“.

The figures cannot be checked and may be exaggerated. Even so, the feat was remarkable, perhaps unique. For have historians recorded any other successful attack in the war on a German troop train inside the Reich?

* * *

Franc Vidrih was the only *padalec* to be taken prisoner in the field. In fact he had the unusual experience in his military carcer of being captured three times by armies of different countries. Born in 1922 at Podraga near Ajdovščina (then Aidussina) in the Vipava valley, Vidrih was first taken prisoner as an Italian soldier by the British after the battle of EI Alamein in November 1942. Selected and trained by ISLD, he arrived by parachute in a mission after the Italian surrender of September 1943. Apart from his military duties it was a chance, at last, to see his family again in a surprise visit home; unfortunately, his visit coincided with a German raid on his village. Vidrih had the presence of mind to give a false name and his identity was never discovered, but he was hauled off to prison in Trieste and then deported by train to a German labour unit, first to Vilnius in Lithuania, then to Minsk in Byelorussia. There he was captured for the third time, by the Russians when they liberated the area. The advancing Red Army unit thought he and his fellow forced labourers were part of the German 'armed forces, and the prisoners went through some risky moments before the Russians could be convinced of the truth. Repatriated, Vidrih died from injuries in an accident with a tractor in 1983.

* * *

Two of the volunteers came from Trieste: Marjan Fegec and Josip Dolenc. Fegec was by all accounts an outstanding person, who would have gone far in life. He was born on 4 December 1919, of a Slovene father and a Croat mother from Istria. In Trieste he first went to a school where the teaching was in Slovene – they had not yet all been abolished by the Fascists. But his father worked on the state railways and, like many ethnic Slovene public employees, he and his family were transferred out of the area, to Lombardy. Mario – as he now had to be called, in Italian – completed his education at an Italian commercial school. Besides Italian, he spoke what a British report after his SOE training quaintly called the „native Slovene dialect". Such was to be the effect of Fascist rule, however, that his younger cousins grew up in Trieste without any such knowledge of the „dialect". His father's brother had two sons – one many years later was employed in the Trieste fire brigade – who speak no Slovene, only Italian. Though their surname has remained the same, they are examples of a segment of the Slovene population that has been Italianised.

After rising to be a senior NCO in the Italian army in Libya, Fegec was taken prisoner by the Australians in Tobruk in January 1941; some reports say he deserted. His training followed the course of the other Italo-Slovenes who volunteered for special service. The British report, mentioned above, gave him an exceptional write-up.

„Character: very good. Health: very good. Strong Subjects: Sabotage, Map-reading, Unarmed combat, Special PT (Physical Training), Observation. Weapons. Weak Subjects: Nil."

Then: „Remarks: Very intelligent. Quick Thinking. Resourceful. Reliable and competent. Noticeably outstanding in his training. Organiser."

On 2 October 1943 Fegec was parachuted as sabotage expert with Captain Davies in Flotsam mission to report to Major Jones at HQ Slovenia. After being joined by a British wireless operator they were to move north into Štajerska. As already seen, events worked out otherwise. The operator never arrived, and Davies was sent to replace Darewski at IX Corps. Fegec was therefore put at the disposal of the Partizans to instruct them in sabotage and demolition. Subsequently Jones was recalled to Bari and Fegec was admitted into the JANL, in which he was promoted to officer rank. He organised training courses and personally led sabotage operations while serving with various units, notably the Dolenjski *odred* (detachment) and the engineer battalion of 15 Division; then, in the autumn after the war, he was transferred to an anti-aircraft artillery unit.

* * *

The other Triestino volunteer, Josip Dolenc, was politically active as well as patriotically minded. Unlike most of the others, he did not enter British service through being captured in the Italian forces in Africa; classed as a „mechanic" – stoker – in the merchant navy, he fell into British hands when the Royal Navy intercepted his ship in the Red Sea soon after Italy declared war on Britain in 1940.

Born on 15 April 1910, Dolenc was one of five children of a master carpenter at Opicina, terminus of the tramline on the escarpment above Trieste. Though a suburb, Opicina still preserved its village character and was inhabited predominantly by Slovenes. As a youth he got a job in the San Marco shipyard in Trieste, but was sacked – the Fascists were already in power – after reading material in the Slovene language was found on him. When doing his military service in the Italian navy, Dolenc met Communist sailors and was converted to their ideas, being accepted into the Party, which of course was banned. On his return home he became secretary of an underground Communist Party cell in Opicina; at Christmas 1935 the Communists distributed gift packages to poor Slovene children in the neighbourhood, containing greetings and a message from Dolenc telling them not to forget their Slovene heritage.

Probably because of this, he was arrested on 6 January 1936 and condemned to four years' „confinement" or internal exile far away on the island of Ponza in the southern Tyrrhenian Sea. On arrest he was subjected to a standard beating up during interrogation in the Trieste *questura* or police headquarters; treatment that was to have after-effects on his physical fitness, particularly on his ears. Released under a general amnesty, Dolenc found it impossible to obtain work at home in the atmosphere of Fascist Italy. The only course open was to go to sea in a cargo ship.

After capture of their vessel, the crew were transported to an internment camp in India, where the British nominally in charge thought all the 500 Italian inmates were Fascists and, as Dolenc related in an autobiographical note, let the Fascist element hold sway in the camp. He

suffered derision and humiliation under them for a year and a half before the British could be persuaded that his loyalty lay on the Allied side and he and some fellow Slovenes were released and sent to Egypt. There Dolenc met Rudolf, was accepted into ISLD and underwent the usual training.

By now the consequences of his police beating up were causing Dolenc persistent ear trouble, which remained uncured despite a month in a Jewish hospital in Jerusalem, where the ISLD training school had been temporarily evacuated in 1942 during the Axis threat to the Nile delta from El Alamein. For this reason he was considered unfit for a mission in the field. Instead, he was used at base on decoding and translating into English – he had by now mastered the language – the messages received in Slovene from the early missions like that of Semolič. Dolenc was evidently a person of intelligence and natural authority, for under Rudolf's general direction he became an instructor to his companions in enciphering and other subjects; to which he added, on his own initiative, somewhat more extramural study hours discussing politics and Communism.

His work in receiving and decoding signals enabled him to send private messages to Slovenia on his own and, he related, he got himself accepted in this way into the national liberation movement already in April 1943. After the base headquarters moved to Bari that autumn he made contact with the JANL mission there and had a private interview with, among others, Colonel – later General – Vladimir Velebit, well known to the British as Tito's chief liaison officer and later ambassador in London. At last after personal lobbying Dolenc succeeded in getting himself chosen for the field. Because of his ear trouble, he was unsuited as a radio operator. So, on 10 May 1944, he dropped as interpreter to Major Nigel Watson who was being sent as chief of a British-led ISLD mission to IX Corps. Dolenc arrived with more fervently and sincerely held Communist convictions than those of many of the Partizans among whom he was to live.

12
Captain John Leonard

At HQ Slovenia Captain John Leonard of ISLD became involved, through no fault of his own, in an incident that led to the temporary disgrace of one of the top Slovene political leaders, Boris Kidrič. A pre-war Party member and son of a university professor, Kidrič was the second most important Slovene Communist after Edvard Kardelj; in his career he was Communist Slovenia's first prime minister and, in the difficult years after the war, head of the Federal Planning Commission, a kind of economic overlord for the Jugoslav economy.

Information on the incident comes from Slovene sources. In spring 1944 HQ Slovenia was hard up for funds. Leonard was the channel though which the British, evidently M16, offered a loan, some of which was to be spent on financing intelligence activities; Leonard was keen on promoting collaboration with his opposite numbers at HQ Slovenia on intelligence gathering, and a loan would help him to get closer to them. The offer was accepted. The money was materially handed over however not by Leonard but by Captain James Goodwin, an American who temporarily headed Flotsam mission as a joint UK-US operation at HQ Slovenia after the departure of SOE's Major Jones. Some reports indicate that the loan amounted to 20 million Italian lire, others to 100 million; whichever was correct, the sum was considerable, as the lira had not yet suffered its spiralling post-war inflation.

News of this independent financial transaction by the Slovenes reached Partizan GHQ for Jugoslavia early in June. It was not well received. Kidrič, who had already been suspected of having private intelligence contacts with Jones, was suspended from his functions and a commission of enquiry was appointed to look into his activities. The fuss, however, only lasted a short time. Kidrič was supported by Leskošek, who showed that the Slovene Communist Party Central Committee had backed the decision to accept the loan and that there were no untoward motives and no independent lines of communication had been opened with the West. Kidrič was reinstated, though Kardelj at Tito's HQ reprimanded the Slovenes in a letter dated 29 July; in accepting money from the West they had committed an error that might cost them dear one day.

During summer 1944 Leonard tried to give Major Nigel Watso a helping hand. He intervened in August with his counterpart in the Partizan intelligence unit to see if Watson could be provided with a better interpreter. Josip Dolenc, who accompanied Watson from Italy for that purpose, had been posted away and, Leonard pointed out, a woman allocated to him was not satisfactory. Leonard also informed the Partizans that ISLD planned to send in a Captain George Craig to the Primorska and asked for authorisation and the necessary facilities to be granted to him.

John Leonard was the cover name for Zdravko Lenščak who together with Alojz Sivec as his radio operator had dropped on 18 July 1943 from the same plane as SOE's Stanko Simčič and Ivo Božič. That was in the upper Soča valley, far away in the Primorska or western Slovenia. But they immediately parted company from the SOE group; Dušan Kveder, the political

commissar, was present and conducted them to HQ Slovenia, where they had arrived by 8 August 1943. Lenščak did not return to the Primorska; a year later, in August 1944, he was signing letters as head of mission Moth, presumably ISLD's main mission with HQ Slovenia.

Captain John Leonard regarded himself – with some reason – as operating on an altogether higher level than the other *padalci*. He was a colleague of Major Watson, who was a veteran of British Intelligence with great experience of the Soviet world and its ways. To understand Leonard/Lenščak is not easy. He was of undoubted intelligence and sensitivity, yet in some ways strangely naive. To form a picture of him and his mission from the information available is like juggling with pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, which are difficult to fit together and anyhow too few to be complete.

For example, what was his mission's brief and where was it bound? If it dropped in the Primorska, why did it not stay there? If it was intended for HQ Slovenia, why did it not drop either there or in Croatia, as Jones did? An ISLD officer, incidentally, had arrived with Jones in Croatia, in the person of Captain Anthony Hunter, who also made his way to HQ Slovenia. Hunter was evacuated to Cairo to report in December 1943; what were Lenščak's relations with him during the period between August and December, when the two must have been near each other if not together? Had the Lenščak mission made the initial journey from Primorska to HQ Slovenia under its free decision, or did the Partizans give it no choice? The latter appears more likely, though an answer is not possible.

Lenščak was born on 26 December 1919 at Novo Mesto in the Dolenjska region of southern Slovenia, where his father was employed by the railway. Both parents however came originally from the Primorska. The young Lenščak was an above-average student; he obtained an excellent education, leading to two years at the philosophical faculty of Ljubljana University then, with the aid of a stipend, 18 months in Rome where he was blocked by the Axis attack on Jugoslavia in April 1941. Briefly interned by the Italians, Lenščak was evacuated along with the staff of the Jugoslav Legation in Rome to neutral Lisbon. There he remained six months. This experience laid the foundation for an impressive command of languages: he claimed fluency in English, Italian, French and Portuguese, together with some knowledge of Spanish.

In December 1941 Lenščak was called to London along with other Jugoslav students by the government, now in exile there. He worked on the staff of minister Krek of the Clerical Party – a subsequent Partizan report described him as Krek's private secretary. though presumably he was not the principal one – till, as he himself related, he volunteered for service with the British.

Accepted by MI6, he did the usual courses in intelligence gathering, radio operating and parachuting, apparently in Britain, before leaving for the Middle East. His recruitment thus followed a different path to most of the other *padalci*.

For months Lenščak worked with the ISLD mission at HQ Slovenia, gathering military intelligence and collaborating as best he could with his Partizan opposite numbers. Then on 7 October 1944 he wrote to the political commissar at HQ Slovenia, Boris Kraigher, formally applying to be admitted into the Jugoslav Army of National Liberation, both on his own behalf and that of the other Slovene members of his mission: Alojz Sivec, his radio operator; Zvonimir

Jelen, his encipherer; and Ivan Mikuž, whom he regarded as under his command but who was absent because he had been sent to observe and report on railway traffic on the line from Tarvisio to Udine in Italy. His application, Lenščak added, had been discussed with his British superiors and approved by them. The timing of the request, 7 October, may have appeared significant if not suspicious to the Partizans, because just then commissar Avbelj was in the midst of demolishing a British spy ring he thought he had found at IX Corps.

On 21 January 1945 Lenščak was admitted into the Partizan forces, and posted to their Cankar Brigade; in the transfer he lost his officer rank and became a private soldier. In the interval, on 5 November 1944, he married in church Milena Bučik, a Partizan worker and teacher; best man was Božidar Jakac, one of Slovenia's foremost painters who inter alia did a portrait of Tito. Milena lived at Petrova Vas, a village in Bela Krajina, a region lying south of Lenščak's birthplace of Novo Mesto, towards the Croatian border.

On 11 March, only six weeks after joining the Partizans, Lenščak was wounded in action. His left elbow and right hand were hit and the middle finger of his right hand had to be amputated. He got himself evacuated to south Italy and on 24 March wrote to his wife, using his left hand, from the British forces 95th General Hospital in Barletta near Bari. On recovery he returned to his unit.

Lenščak's rank, or assumed rank, of captain is one of the uncertain jigsaw pieces and would merit further examination. None of his fellow *padalc*i were officers. Of course, it could be said that he was of higher calibre, having studied at university and worked albeit briefly with a minister in the government in exile. MI6, for that matter, could within limits ascribe a certain rank to an agent and was under no obligation to put one of its men through an officers' cadet training course. Nevertheless, it would be useful to have confirmation that he was really a captain in the British forces.

After the war, on 30 June 1945, Lenščak applied unsuccessfully through his battalion headquarters to have his rank of captain recognised in the JANL. He justified his previous voluntary enrolment in the British forces while with the émigré government in London by saying that this was the only way he could avoid being sent to the Četniks of Draža Mihailović. He had first been a non-commissioned officer in the British forces, but in July 1943 – the month when he parachuted into Slovenia – was granted officer's rank as lieutenant. Then, he wrote, promotion to captain came in February 1944, when he was already in Jugoslavia.

Certainly, Lenščak got the Partizans' backs up by insisting on his British connection. This was apparent from the beginning. On 8 August 1943 the commander and commissar of HQ Slovenia sent a message to the secretariat of the Jugoslav Communist Party Central Committee, informing it of the arrival of a group under Lenščak, who had already volunteered valuable information about conditions among the exiled Jugoslavs. However, they added, „the man is otherwise pretty unlikeable, for he tries all the time, in spite of being a Slovene, to play the Englishman".

Lieutenant-Colonel P. N. M. Moore, who had now become the chief BLO at HQ Slovenia, did not have a particularly high opinion of him. On 23 December 1944 Moore reported back to Bari that Lenščak was waiting for permission to join the Partizans; he inferred that the

permission was taking time because of rumours that Lenščak might be a collaborationist White Guard (Domobranec) or Četnik agent (his brother was in fact a Domobranec officer). Lenščak was bitter about the delay, and Moore thought it would be better if he were sent back to Italy. „Not being a very well-balanced character, his continued presence here is a real danger to his own safety. If he comes out“, Moore emphasised, „he should not be regarded as a reliable source of information“.

Moore probably did not know that since the autumn the Partizan leadership had been in a state of ferment about what it saw as dangerous threats of British Intelligence penetration. Warnings issued by Aleksandar Ranković, the security chief at Partizan GHQ, and by the Slovene Communist leader Edvard Kardelj have been described by Dr Biber. On 30 September 1944 Ranković informed Tito that a circuit of the Intelligence Service had been unmasked with V (Bosnian) corps; arrests had been made and an investigation was under way. This group was plotting to liquidate people; in fact it might already have liquidated an OZNA officer and stolen his files. Then on 14 October Kardelj, in a letter to the Central Committee of the Slovene Communist Party, wrote that they had discovered an espionage organisation that was preparing sabotage and attacks. It was evidently a different group, for Kardelj said it had poisoned 40 members of OZNA in Slavonia (eastern Croatia); some had died, while the others were in hospital. „Be on the alert!“ he warned.

Lenščak thus chose a most unpropitious moment to apply to join the JANL. On 3 January Moore signalled that the rumours about Lenščak had stopped and „at the commissar’s request I have agreed to let Leonard and his party remain here until 20 January“. This was the time when Lenščak was in fact accepted into the JANL. Moore did not appear keen to keep him indefinitely. Incidentally Moore did not refer to Lenščak as captain, though it must be said that, for brevity, in these radio messages people’s rank was usually omitted.

Perhaps highly strung might be a better description of the man whom Moore regarded as „not very well balanced“. Some of his letters to his wife Milena have been published and give evidence of sensitivity and depth of feeling. On 18 June 1944, while they were still engaged, Lenščak wrote that he had always with him three pictures, which were the lodestars of his being. One was a reproduction of Rembrandt's „Supper at Emmaus“, a symbol of everything beautiful and good that mankind had created – though this certainly did not comprise the present Catholic Church, which in his view was playing a shameful role in Slovenia. Then there was a picture of Tito, whom he described as a symbol of humane Christianity, with a „deeply messianic content“ (how strangely similar to Jones's view). And lastly, a picture of Milena, who to him was everything.

They saw very little of each other after the wedding; but on 3 August 1945 Milena bore him a daughter.

13.
The Watson Circuit

MI6 had already beaten SOE with the despatch of Slovene parachutists to the Primorska. It was slower in sending British agents, but from now on, there were to be two parallel British-led missions, one from each the two organisations. Watson's mission lasted seven months. At the end of it IX Corps headquarters entertained him to a handsome dinner, to bid him godspeed on his way to evacuation via HQ Slovenia to base. The occasion was reported in *Partizanski Dnevnik*, the Partizan daily printed in the woods, which after the war was moved to Trieste and renamed *Primorski Dnevnik*; it proudly claims to be the only European daily newspaper born out of the resistance still in continuous publication after more than half a century. As will be seen, the atmosphere conveyed in its issue of 30 November 1944 is so far from reality that its report is worth reproducing in full.

> On 27 November the headquarters staff of IX Corps staged a farewell evening for Mr Major Watson, member of the British mission, who is leaving for a new assignment. The dinner was attended by the entire British mission under Captain Gipps (sic), by the head of the Soviet mission Mr Lieutenant Colonel Rybachenko, by Allied officers and several high officers of our army. The Regional Liberation Committee was represented by Comrades Bevk and Vilfan. Present were also Comrade Šentjurc and Comrade Kimovec. During the dinner several important toasts were exchanged. Comrade Vilfan took leave of Mr Watson in the name of the Regional Liberation Committee. Emphasising the feelings of our people for the Allies and the help which the Allies have given to our army on the territory of IX Corps, he expressed the conviction that Mr Watson, wherever he goes, will be able to testify to the attachment of the Slovensko Primorje to the new Jugoslavia. „The fact that the inhabitants of the Primorje rose up with bare arms in a people's revolt and after Italy's capitulation organised the Gorizia front, out of which the IX Corps developed, and then impervious to terror built up people's administrations in the course of a year – this is a wonder that can only be explained by the fact that after 25 years of Italian oppression they knew how to keep alive their national consciousness and their consciousness of belonging to Slovenia and to Jugoslavia. The Primorski people have in their common struggle along with all Jugoslavs already erased the unjust frontiers."
>
> Mr Watson in his reply emphasised that he knew, when he came among us, that our region had been a whole quarter of a century under Italy and he was therefore above all surprised when he found here such brave and combative people, who had not forgotten their national allegiance. Mr Lieutenant Colonel Rybachenko spoke in the same sense. „I will tell my children, my wife and all whom I meet about the incredible efforts of this people and their army, efforts which we as soldiers can properly appreciate. I knew about the struggle in this area. Because of old conceptions we took it to be a piece of Italy, but now we have got to know of its inseparable attachment to Slovenia and Jugoslavia."
>
> Comrade Avbelj, political commissar of the corps, expressed the conviction that Mr Watson was not leaving for good and that we would again see him among us.
>
> The whole evening turned into a real manifestation of Allied spirit, which was underlined by the presence of an American officer, a flier who had shortly before been rescued by our Partizans.

He had flown many times over our land – so he said in his toast – and had always wanted to get to know it. He was full of admiration for our struggle and its objectives. He was glad to have come among us, albeit in an unusual manner.

The evening concluded with wishes for a common victory and for a speedy peace.

One or two points are perhaps noting. First, it may seem strange that the Soviet liaison officer is referred to as „mister" and not „comrade", as would be normal among Communists. But *Partizanski Dnevnik* regarded itself as speaking for all the resistance, and not just the Communist Party; it also followed the official line in outwardly maintaining equidistance towards the different allies.

Then Vilfan considered the Primorska (or Slovensko Primorje, to give its less colloquial name), to be already part of Jugoslavia. As also did the Soviet chief of mission, referring to its „inseparable attachment to Slovenia and Jugoslavia". This, of course, was an affirmation that no British liaison officer could have made; under international law sovereignty remained with Italy pending a post-war settlement and BLOs were under instructions not to get involved in political discussions – Watson appears to have been carefully diplomatic.

Lastly, no US mission was then present. The American representative was a shot down air force officer.

* * *

Watson was evidently an imposing figure. When General Ambrožič was asked in conversation over 50 years later who among the British officers had made most impression on him, he replied, „Watson". So did a British veteran, who had been parachuted to Čepovan and passed through IX Corps on his way with a mission to Italian Partizans in north-east Italy. A photograph of the British with IX Corps at that time shows Watson as a tall, strongly-built individual, neat with a tie and short cut all-weather jacket. His cap badge was like that of an officer of a cavalry regiment, possibly the 3rd Hussars. Among others in the group it is possible to recognise Captain Hugh Gibb of SOE and Captain Slattery of A Force, the organisation responsible for escape lines for British prisoners of war and shot down airmen. In another photograph Watson is wearing a black beret typical of the Royal Tank Regiment.

A certain Nigel Watson, who was a career officer in MI5, the counter-intelligence service, was born on 7 July 1899. There are reasonable grounds – almost certainty – for believing that this was he. Assuming he was, Watson was thus already in his forties and older than most of his colleagues. He was reported to have been in Russia as a youngster with the anti-Bolsheviks or Whites already in 1917, the year of the Czar's downfall and the revolution. Russian was only one of several languages he spoke, others being French, Italian, and German, while he probably understood Slovene, although he had arrived with an interpreter in the person of Dolenc. In 1926 the name of Watson appears among the bright young men of MI5 who analysed the documents seized during a police raid on Arcos, the offices of the Soviet trade delegation in London. But, impatient at the inactivity of a chair-borne job during the Second World War, he was said to have got himself transferred to MI6 and parachuted into Jugoslavia.

An undated OZNA report in the Slovene state archives in Ljubljana says that Watson's mission was code-named Bordeaux. His age was put at between 40 and 46. His thinning hair, parted on the left, was reddish-grey in colour – a phrase often used in Slovene reports for the indeterminate mousy shade of many Anglo-Saxons. Watson's moustache was luxuriant. His manner was described as flattering. The secret police author also found him at times a little arrogant, and thought it worth quoting Watson for a remark in September 1944 that the British army would soon arrive and he would no longer have need of a Partizan permit to be where he was.

Dolenc, for reasons of his own, gave a most unfavourable portrait of him. He wrote:

> Major Watson was a strange person. Already in Bari somebody told me that I would surely have trouble with him. He never took part in our meetings. Not even in the conferences called by the HQ staff and to which also members of the English mission were always invited. He was seldom satisfied with the reports from our Intelligence Centre. His questions for the Centre, which I translated for him from English into Slovene, were always couched in a peremptory tone. He also did not want to go without his comforts. For example he did not want to eat together with the other mission officers, but demanded that food be served to him in the billet. With such behaviour, he soon lost all respect and even his comrades froze towards him. In short, I had the impression that for everyone Major Watson became a persona non grata.

These were hard words. To be sure, there was no reason why Dolenc should take to Watson – the one a fervent Communist, the other presumably a hardened anti-Communist. But it should be noted that Dolenc wrote these words later, while recounting his life history in an attempt to show himself off in a favourable light to superiors in the Slovene Communist Party.

Indeed, no feeling of strain between Watson and his fellow countrymen emerges from the material available about Crayon mission; the Crayon signals reflect collaboration rather than tension. Postwar accounts of MI6 and SOE have sometimes depicted their officers as fighting each other as much as the enemy; this was not the case here. Admittedly the two missions, Bordeaux and Crayon, may to some extent have overlapped in their intelligence activities, but nothing more than that. There probably was some confusion on this point, for on 1 October Major Peter Magill, SOEs intelligence officer at base in Cairo and then Bari, sent Gibb a message to define the border between them.

After discussions with ISLD, Magill signalled, it had been agreed that Watson would cover „long term“ intelligence, including „railway traffic, order of battle and strategic moves, defence lines, air raid damage, interruption of communications, economic and naval intelligence“. Gibb was to cover the immediate operational intelligence, including „enemy moves connected with Partizan activity, Partizans' order of battle, moves of Partizan units, Partizan operations“ – just the subjects on which the Partizans were most secretive.

During the summer Watson was busy organising a network or circuit of people who could provide him with information. Due to enemy action, corps' headquarters was not at Čepovan all the time, but moved around in the area. He arranged a system of message bearers

and „letter boxes“ at houses of people he met. The first letter box was at the home of Gizela Bratuž, a peasant girl living with her parents on the outskirts of Čepovan. on whom he was billeted for the first two weeks after arrival.

The secret police believed he was a great womaniser; their reports listed by name 23 contacts he had made, including 16 girls, several of whom they thought were his lovers. No evidence was given to back up this gossip and some of the female contacts appear to have been casual acquaintances or were girls who did domestic jobs for him.

On a more serious level, Watson made progress in setting up his circuit of informants. His own party consisted of a Sergeant Marlow as wireless operator and a Lance-Sergeant (?) Ashworth as encipherer, later joined by a Sergeant Carpenter and Ivan Mikuž, a *padalec*, both radio operators. They lacked a regular interpreter, for Dolenc – who had been given the cover name „Kvirin“ was posted away soon after arrival; if Watson could have got by without an interpreter, the other Britons could certainly not. Watson also met several times Dolenc’s elder brother Milan, who was serving with an operational unit. Watson was of course in contact with ISLD *padalci* who had preceded him, like members of the Semolič mission.

Geographically, Watson was interested in a wide area well beyond the vicinity of Corps HQ, perhaps covering Italian-speaking parts of Friuli as well as Slovene-inhabited areas. Later in the summer Watson was reinforced by Captain George Craig of ISLD, whose instructions were to move south to the South Primorski *odred* (detachment) and organise observation of the traffic on the coastal, railway line from Trieste westwards to Monfalcone. Similarly a Captain Pitt described as of the LRDG (Long Range Desert Group, set up in the days of the Western Desert campaign) arrived in the area with a naval intelligence brief to report on shipping movements in and around Trieste. Watson's superiors also wanted reports to be followed up – they turned out to be true – of a German mini-submarine base hidden in the cliffs at Sistiana between Trieste and Monfalcone.

Towards the north Mikuž had been sent, as noted by Lenščak, to report on railway traffic on the main line from Austria, between Tarvisio and Udine. There is no available evidence that Watson's instructions included the gathering of information from Austria itself, but anything he would be able to provide from there would clearly be of great value. In fact he established links with two Austrian (now of course German) citizens with IX Corps, Niko Dorski and Alojz Knez.

Dorski, also known as Fedor (Theodore?) Tasch – which was the real name and which the alias? – had come from Vienna and at the time was serving with an operational unit of IX Corps. Dorski is a hazy figure. He was quoted by the Partizans as saying he had been sent to Slovenia by an Austrian underground organisation, in which he had the rank of colonel.

More is known about Knez, whose career was so colourful that he merits more detailed mention.

14.
Carinthia’s James Bond

Occasionally someone steps out of a boy's adventure book or a James Bond film into real life. Knez was such a person. His escapes from dangerous situations could not be bettered in Hollywood; at least three times he got away when it looked as if the game was up.

Alojz Knez was born in Maria Gail – in Slovene, Marija na Zilji – just outside Villach in Austrian Carinthia, on 18 June 1918. He died in Carinthia on 27 June 1996, leaving a widow. Though from Austria's Slovene minority, his mother tongue was German, and his Slovene was far from perfect; in fact his comrades complained that for this reason collaboration with him was at times difficult. Those who knew him describe him as daring to the point of foolhardy, instantaneous in his reflexes and a little childish in behaviour. His success with women was undoubted and Dolenc on arriving in the Primorska from Egypt brought for him a letter from a lady with a Greek name with whom he had been having an affair in Alexandria.

Knez differed from the other Slovene parachutists in, first, coming from a German and not Italian-speaking background, and second, in being already an active resistance fighter. His family were left wing, communist or socialist, and active anti-Nazis rather than nationalists. Knez himself was no political thinker and apparently a little muddled in his views; perhaps deliberately so on occasions when he wanted to throw opponents on to a false scent. He claimed to have joined the Austrian Communist youth movement in 1935 and the Party in 1938, yet at another time said he was working for the restoration of the Hapsburg monarchy. But his convictions and spirit of adventure were deep enough for him to engage in sabotage against the Nazis after they had incorporated Austria in the Third Reich. When serving as a conscript in the German armed forces he was told by friends that the Gestapo had found a communist leaflet compromising him, so he fled in early 1940 across the border to Jesenice in north-west Slovenia. He was said to have escaped by train, buried in a wagon carrying coal.

In Slovenia he was active in a TIGR group, which claimed responsibility for raids and incursions across the frontier back into Austria. According to an account he gave when questioned later by the Partizan authorities, his group based in Jesenice organised sabotage against an ammunition factory in Judenburg in Styria, on railway lines in the vicinity and in the Salzkammergut, and against a petrol dump in an unspecified locality. He was presumably referring to activities for which, as Rejec of TIGR related, the British provided explosives and equipment. Prof. Tone Ferenc, a leading Slovene authority on the war of liberation, has found after investigation of German police sources that the results of these exploits were a good deal more modest. Knez brought the explosive across the border to volunteers in Judenburg for three attacks near there on the railway linking Vienna with Italy. Two charges – one under a goods train – were set off during the night of 15/16 April 1940; a third explosion, also under a goods train, took place on 19 May 1940. The operations appear to have been extremely amateurish; small sections of track were blown up, but no train was derailed and traffic was not interrupted. Then on 5 June Italian railwaymen found an only partly successful attempt

had been made to blow up track near Tarvisio, just inside the Italian border on the same line connecting Vienna with Italy.

When Knez was going to an appointment with Austrian volunteers on one such escapade, a personal acquaintance – the widow of a TIGR leader — has related that he was surprised by two Nazi guards on armed patrol. Knez grabbed at the rifle of one, who pressed the trigger; the shot pierced Knez's hand. In a flash he turned on the man, brought him to the ground, then tackled the other and fled. It was his first narrow escape.

As a result of their investigations into these activities, the German authorities in Austria in April and May 1940 arrested a group of Austrian Slovenes including Knez's father, Franc. The father and five others were sentenced to death by a court in Klagenfurt on 25 July 1941 and subsequently executed, while Knez's mother and sister were held in prison or internment camp for the duration of the war. The loss of his father may have provided Knez with additional motivation for his resistance activities. Knez was later to claim that the Nazis had put a reward of 100.000 reichsmarks on his head; presumably there was a touch of blamey in this. Just as in his story that, when doing his military service in 1938 in the German army, he had gone to an officers' school and attained the rank of Leutnant – lieutenant.

Following up their capture of the group of anti-Nazis in Austria, the Germans put diplomatic pressure on the weak Belgrade government to act against those based in Slovenia; the Jugoslav authorities in consequence issued warrants in July 1940 for the arrest of them and of anti-fascist TIGRovci. Knez was one of those lucky enough to escape: he was warmed just before the arrival of the police. From then till the German attack on Jugoslavia in April 1941 he had to live a semi-clandestine existence under an assumed name, first in another part of Slovenia, then in Belgrade. When Jugoslavia surrendered, he got out with Polish and British travel documents – presumably provided with the help of M16 – and made his way via Istanbul to Palestine and Egypt. Here he came into contact with Rudolf and Josip Dolenc and was accepted into ISLD who put him through the usual training.

His mission in the Primorska, judging from signals between Crayon and base, appears to have been called Razor; he was the intelligence gatherer and saboteur, while Miloš Adamič from the village of Škrbina in the *karst* between Trieste and Gorizia was the radio operator. They dropped to near the headquarters of the Partizans in the Primorska on 18 September 1943. Their brief was to strike north, probably via the north-east corner of Italy, into Carinthia – whether Austrian (i.e. Kaernten) or Slovene (i.e. Koruška) is not clear. There is no indication that Darewski, who had arrived five weeks earlier, was informed about them: in fact, in his report he complained that he was not always told about the presence of ISLD missions.

Just ten days before the arrival of Knez and Adamič Italy had surrendered, and the Germans soon launched their offensive to regain the ground lost to the Partizans. Everything was in a state of flux. Knez and Adamič were caught up in it and found that the way to the north was no longer open. The mission, according to Knez's account, never managed to establish a proper radio link with Cairo. But later, when the German offensive had blown itself out, they were ordered by Dušan Kveder, the political commissar, to set out for the north with

the objective of making contact with Austrian Partizans. On the way however Knez fell and broke a bone in his leg, so had to go into a Partizan hospital.

He was well enough to marry Marija Mrak, a girl with the Partizans, at the end of February 1944. She was oldest in a family of 11 children from near Čepovan and eight years older than he was. On 24 June came Knez's second brush with death. He and his wife were manning a lookout post a few kilometres north of Čepovan. It was on the rim of a precipitous descent or cliff into a deep valley in which lay the small town of Slap, held by the enemy. The lookout post was placed so as to be able to check any movement of people coming up from the valley along a rough road cut into the steep hillside. Marija, though she was pregnant, was there at the request of a sister originally detailed for the duty.

Here they were surprised by a German patrol. In the words of the record of his questioning:

> According to Knez, Germans appeared unexpectedly and pointed three quick-firing tommy guns at his chest. His wife, who tried to run away, was shot dead. They ordered him to place the palms of his hands behind his neck, with the intention of turning him round and shooting him, but he seized a chance and kicked the German standing in front of him in the belly, then leapt over the edge of the road and fell deep down underneath at a place where there was a sudden drop. Knez was badly shaken up and suffered some damage to his back and head. When he came to, he dragged himself to a house and then the same day was taken to a (Partizan) first aid post.

After recovery, Knez remained during that summer with a newly formed engineers or sapper unit with IX Corps head-quarters. As an example of what they accomplished, Knez said he blew up a locomotive on the railway line passing along the Soča valley, in a group of six commanded by Cvetko Šuligoj, who had himself recently recovered from wounds. Watson, according to Knez, told him he would like to send him with a British mission into Austria, since he knew the lie of the land. But General Novljan, the corps commander, was of the view that he could not be spared from the engineers unit, so he stayed where he was.

* * *

Watson had thus laid the foundation for an effective intelligence gathering network. Beside his own immediate mission (Marlow, Ashworth, Carpenter) and Gibb of SOE, those with whom he was in touch included Mikuž, Semolič, Krizmantič, Sever, Josip Dolenc's elder brother Milan, Dorski, Knez, plus several local inhabitants, as well as fellow British intelligence gatherers Craig and Pitt. His feelers extended from Trieste and the coast in the south to the borders of Austria in the north.

These borders, incidentally, had little more than geographical significance since Italy's surrender, for the Germans had put the whole area under their direct control as *Adriatisches Kuestenland*, or Adriatic Coastland, thus providing the Reich with an outlet to the Mediterranean; Mussolini's Italian Social Republic may have claimed to have retained sovereignty, but this was purely nominal.

The prospective advantage to Watson of his circuit was considerable. The information doled out to BLOs by the Partizans was highly selective, from indirect sources whose reliability was difficult if not impossible to assess, and lacking in the broader perspective of interest to the Allies. Watson was now in a position to obtain his own intelligence information independently of the Partizans.

15.
The Crunch

An independent intelligence circuit was just what the Partizans could not accept. Viktor Avbelj, known as Rudi, faced this problem as soon as he arrived at IX Corps headquarters as the new political commissar. He was appointed on 9 September 1944, taking the place of Janez Hribar – Tone in a changeover that also saw Lado Ambrožič – Novljan replaced as commander by Stane Potočar – Lazar. On 26 September Avbelj received a message from HQ Slovenia that Western Allied missions should be carefully supervised „so that they do not set up any independent channels“. He evidently had an unwelcome surprise when he made Watson's acquaintance, while Watson for his part was perhaps a little ingenuous; for Avbelj reported back to HQ Slovenia on 1 October: „Major Watson has already informed me of many matters, about which the senior staff had no idea, and it is clear that they (the British mission) have excellent links in the near entourage of the staff.“

Avbelj was a hard-headed Communist, a chip off the old block. Born in February 1914, he had as a student in pre-war Jugoslavia been involved in revolutionary activities and helped to organise a strike of workers in a paper-making factory. In 1937 he was admitted to membership of the underground Communist Party. Immediately before coming to IX Corps he had been deputy political commissar at HQ Slovenia. After the war Avbelj was briefly deputy head of OZNA for Slovenia, and in the period 1947 – 48 was public prosecutor for the republic of Slovenia, officiating at several Stalinist-type political trials.

Avbelj was in no two minds about the British and their Slovene parachutists being spies. In this he clashed with General Ambrožič –Novljan, who stood up for the padalci. An OZNA report dated 30 October 1944 said that Comrade Novljan – just before his departure from the corps – had given Comrade Rudi „a sharp answer about the reliability of the radio-telegraphist parachutists, saying that they are reliable and that he can trust them“.

In the light of what happened, it is easy to portray Avbelj as the over-zealous executor of orders, if not the villain in the piece. Yet other evidence suggests that this would be an exaggeration; that there was another side to him and that his was a more complex character. Frank Lindsay, then a major in the OSS heading a US mission in the Štajerska, first came across Avbelj as deputy political commissar when passing through HQ Slovenia. Then Avbelj accompanied Lindsay on an operation in June 1943 in which an important viaduct on the railway line leading into Austria was blown up. „We became good friends“, Lindsay wrote. Avbelj was „a small man, quiet in speech, and always to the point“. An ex-OZNA colleague of Avbelj described him in private conversation in 1999 as a „liberal“ at heart who did not like his postwar OZNA appointment and got himself posted away after only a short time in the job.

After arrival at IX Corps Avbelj lost little time in implementing his instructions. He ordered that Watson must stop work; already on 11 October Gibb of SOE’s Crayon mission reported this to Bari. The message was sent over the Crayon set because Watson was not even allowed to use his own transmitter. At the same time Craig was instructed by the Partizans to

come to Corps HQ, while Pitt was told to return to HQ Slovenia on the grounds that he had come without authority from Tito. A few days later, inactivity was also imposed on Captain Slattery, whom A Force had sent to Corps HQ as its representative.

Living under these restrictions was obviously a strain on people's nerves. On 13 November Gibb's set carried this message from Andy to Rydon – presumably the code names for Slattery and his boss at base – „What's going on and why the obstruction? And what is the point in remaining where I am not wanted and can do no good?"

Avbelj took drastic measures against Watson's local contacts or supposed contacts. Knez was called to Corps headquarters with a message that he was being transferred to another unit, and was arrested on 24 October. He was told that he was accused of „being a person who cooperates with reactionaries and operates under the mask of an English parachutist against the unity of our peoples, to the damage of all people fighting for freedom and democracy".

Three days later two local girls, Gizela Bratuž and Otilija Bremec, were pulled in. Watson's interpreter Josip Dolenc had already been transferred out of harm's way, to a workshop with HQ Slovenia. His elder brother Milan, who was with a unit of IX Corps, was summoned for interrogation. Those arrested may also have included an Italian, for an OZNA internal document, after referring to the two girls' questioning, said – without identifying him – „The Italian told a lot."

How much of this operation was locally inspired in Slovenia and how much originated from the top, from Tito and his entourage? As already mentioned, Tito was angry and highly suspicious over the US decision, independently of the British, to send OSS missions to Draža Mihailović's Četniks in Serbia and his reaction to the decision had repercussions on Allied-Partizan relations. It was thus not surprising that an order came down the channel of command from Tito's supreme HQ to supervise the Western Allied missions more closely. In practice this meant that mission members should not be free to move around as they wished; and their number should be limited – if possible, there should be no Western Allied missions at divisional level and only one officer at corps level. These instructions were not implemented as strictly in some other parts of Jugoslavia as in Slovenia; elsewhere some BLOs moved as and where they wanted. But then, suspicion in Slovene minds particularly in the Primorska was deep seated, ever since the Western powers had bribed Italy at Slovene expense in the secret London agreement of 1915 to turn against its allies and enter the First World War on the Western side.

Now the problem loomed again on the horizon. To whom, after the victory, were these lands to be awarded: Italy or Jugoslavia? Would there once again be double dealing and secret agreements? These were questions that from this time on made relations between British missions and the Partizans more difficult.

* * *

Interrogation reports have survived, and are held in Slovene government archives, of most of those known to have been arrested. The two girls, Gizela Bratuž and Otilija Bremec, were grilled as soon as they had been picked up from their homes and brought to the local OZNA post. A telltale sentence in an OZNA covering letter to the interrogation reports says: „We employed force on both."

Gizela was the 30-year-old daughter in a peasant family with whom Watson and his mission had been billeted for the first fortnight after their arrival. She gave a long account about acting as an intermediary for letters passing to and from between Watson and the Austrian Feodor Tasch, Alojz Knez, Milan Dolenc, his brother Josip. She did not however admit any political or military involvement or knowledge; in fact, her interrogator tested her about possible preparations for an Allied landing in Istria and she replied that no such thing had ever been mentioned in front of her. Then, next day, she found the courage to refuse to sign the interrogation report that had been drawn up; instead she made an „additional declaration" in which she watered down her role as a contact and emphasised that she and her house were used as no more than a letter box.

Otilija, the interrogator noted, did not talk so much. She was pretty, yet 24 years old, and she said Watson had come across her in her house when she was doing sewing. He asked her if she would do sewing and laundering for him and she consented. Their meetings had been limited to that. Asked about the contacts with other members of the circuit, Otilija disclosed nothing of importance but let an interesting detail about the resourcefulness of Knez. He had arranged dumps in several private cottages; not however of arms or ammunition but of food. For example, he had stoved away four hams with a family known as Perajc.

Both girls were none the less deemed too unreliable to remain in the area and were mobilised and sent away for Partizan duties in the interior of Slovenia. The unfortunate Gizela seems to have been despatched without a proper movement order, for she was arrested and interrogated again on arrival in the Bela Krajina district, and had to explain away rumours that she had been „hiding an English parachutist".

* * *

Milan Dolenc was the most unfortunate of those detained. He was a bank clerk by profession, already aged 42 when he left his home in a Trieste suburb to join the Partizans as a patriotic volunteer on 26 June 1944. His was a tragic family; three of his four children had already died young from illness, while the fourth, Jadran, a sailor, was to die in 1963 aged 25. His brother Josip, eight years younger, had already dropped to IX Corps as a parachutist with Watson the previous May.

In the interrogation report after his arrest, Milan admitted to meetings with his brother, sometimes in the presence of Watson. But there is nothing to suggest that they were anything more than of a family or social nature, or that he gave any military or political information to Watson. He was interrogated twice, on 7 and 8 November. Then, on the evening of the 8th he took advantage of the guard being momentarily out of the room to escape. Dolenc did not

know the lie of the land, so remained in a wood all night, but was caught when entering a village next morning. The third interrogation, on 9 November, lasted an hour and a half: after which, the interrogator laconically noted: „The prisoner died from injuries“. These words, in themselves clear enough, are complemented by references in other OZNA documents. „The arrested man succumbed to wounds received in the attempted escape from our jail“; and, elsewhere, referring to Josip Dolenc: „His brother Dolenc Milan, from the Primorska, had shortly before been arrested and liquidated“. His guard, incidentally, was also shot for allowing him to escape.

Josip wrote Milan a letter from the interior of Slovenia on 13 December; the letter was intercepted by OZNA and is in its files. In it Josip asked for his news and wrote, „your silence arouses in me greater and greater anxiety every day“. Josip did not know that his brother had been dead for a month.

Officially Milan fell in battle on 18 October 1944. His name is inscribed on the village war memorial at Opicina outside Trieste. His widow, Ivanka, continued to receive a Jugoslav army pension till her death in 1992; fortunately for her, she was never told the truth.

* * *

Knez's behaviour after his arrest was true to form. He spun a long and muddled story about his life; to confuse his captors. or just to keep talking? He went on about membership of the pre-war Austrian Communist party, support for the restoration of the Austrian monarchy, his call-up into the German Army, promotion in it to officer rank, the price of 100.000 reichsmarks on his head; he had the gift of the gab, if not of veracity. Then came a long account of his time in pre-war Jugoslavia, his escape to the Middle East, his acceptance into ISLD and his activities in the Primorska. In British-administered Palestine he had seen collective farms, which signified that under the British there was a form of communism; yet later, he told his interrogator, Britain was „an imperialist dictatorship“, run not by the workers and peasants but by the possessors of capital. And so on.

Knez's interrogation report ran to nearly eight closely-typed pages. The interrogation may have been unfinished: in any case, he never signed the report. There were of course no prison cells in the countryside, so he was kept, bound hand and foot, in the first floor room of a house occupied by OZNA, his limbs being freed only to enable him to eat meals. When supper came two days after his arrest, Knez adopted the simple expedient of saying he was not hungry and got the guard to take his uneaten meal back to the kitchen. Another soldier, who had been unwell and was using the room, had himself gone out to eat. Knez for the moment was alone. It took him no time to open a window, jump on to the roof of an outside lavatory and then down a slope and into the wild. Knez had friends and contacts in the neighbourhood, as we know from the story of his hams, and his pursuers never found him. It was his third escape.

OZNA circulated orders to arrest him to all its posts, but to no avail. Shortly before the end of the war Knez reappeared in his native Maria Gail. On 3 March 1945 six local Partizans

headed by Knez, operating as a group using the code name Zany, attacked the village gendarmerie post, but without success. So writes a local historian, who adds that Knez repeated the operation at the beginning of May, and this time captured the post, holding it till the arrival of Tito's Partizans a week later. Knez gave out that he was a major in the British secret service. At first he was disbelieved and, according to these local reports, was in January 1946 arrested by the British occupation authorities, being accused by residents of house breaking and burglary. But clarification came that he had really been linked with British Intelligence – even if not with the rank of a major – and he was released.

After the war, later in 1946, Knez was employed by a Villach brewery. He got to know an Austrian lady who spoke German but not Slovene and married her; they went to live at Puch, in a purely German-speaking area between Villach and Spittal, where he died on 27 June 1996.

* * *

The British were slow to realise that the Partizans, or at least Avbelj, were determined to be rid of Watson. On 11 October Gibb had reported that Watson had been ordered to stop work; it was not till mid-November that Gibb was informed of Bari's decision to replace him with a certain Major Lyle Smythe as ISLD representative. During this period the British were under the illusion that Watson might be allowed to stay, for various messages from British representatives with HQ Slovenia and Tito's HQ suggested that IX Corps was being ordered to be more cooperative.

Much more was going on behind the scenes than the British were aware of, for on 19 October, in the midst of the preparations for the wave of arrests and interrogations, Gibb reported that the entire Slovene liaison staff between the Corps HQ and the mission had been replaced. As for the arrests, the British may not have known of them at the time they were made, but they soon became aware of people disappearing. For example on 14 November Gibb reported that the „arrested woman" – presumably Gizela Bratuz – had not appeared and her parents were avoiding members of the mission; one person had also declined to be seen with members of the mission for fear of the consequences. In fact, it had already been decided that Gizela Bratuž and Otilija Bremec should be sent out of reach of the British to the interior of Slovenia.

On 14 November too Gibb reported that the Partizans regarded Watson „with great suspicion". He followed this the next day, in a message whose text is partly garbled, by describing Watson as „not persona grata" – Josip Dolenc had been unconsciously prophetic in his opinion – and by suggesting that Watson should be evacuated.

If the British had reflected more carefully, they might have tumbled to the reason behind this deep suspicion. But the penny did not apparently drop. Years later, however, a leading Slovene modern historian, Dr Dušan Biber, made a persuasive point. There was, as already mentioned, a Soviet mission with IX Corps; and there was evidence that the mission warned the Slovenes of Watson having been in Russia during the civil war, on the anti-Bolshevik side. Little more need be said.

It was in this atmosphere of skin-deep cordiality that Corps HQ entertained Watson to a farewell dinner on 27 November, when toasts were exchanged and Avbelj expressed the hope that Watson would come back to Slovenia after the war.

16.
Always Number Two

In the first half of that last January of the war the British were prepared to drop large quantities of supplies to IX Corps. But due to a combination of bad weather and the short-sightedness – if not pig-headedness – of commissar Avbelj, a large proportion of these supplies did not get through. The British personnel at base in southern Italy who arranged the sorties had military, not political, considerations in mind. Their desire was to see the Germans beaten as soon as possible and to help the hard-pressed IX Corps make its contribution to this. At their level, high politics were above them; it was outside their range of thinking whether the Allies or Jugoslavs were to occupy Trieste after the Germans had gone and whether IX Corps might hoard their supplies for possible later use against the Western Allies.

On 8 and 15 January the British sent no less than a total of 111 aircraft to drop to IX Corps. The operations were little short of a catastrophe. Only 13 aircraft succeeded and of these 7 dropped by mistake to the enemy. Two of the aircraft were lost.

These figures are given in a formal letter sent on 19 January to General Dušan Kveder, now Partizan commander in Slovenia – officially, General Officer Commanding Slovene Army of National Liberation – by Lieutenant Colonel P. N. M. Moore, BLO to HQ Slovenia. „For your information recent attempts to fly stores to IX Corps have been disastrous“, the letter began. Moore wrote that the previous day, the 18th, another wave of 95 aircraft was due to fly to IX Corps; this made the need to solve the problem „even more urgent“.

Moore was a hard-headed RE (engineer) and a diametrically different character from his predecessor, the eccentric Major Jones. The reason for his letter was a complaint from Hugh Gibb at being ejected from his DZ (dropping zone). Avbelj, in the course of the anti-British drive that had as a high point the expulsion of Watson, had ordered Gibb to move away from his DZ, in spite of the fact that common sense demanded he should be on the spot to attend to the receipt of supplies.

Moore did not mince words. „The attitude of the Commissar has been unreasonable and uncompromising and the reasons given for the move have been inconsistent“, he wrote. „It is essential that the British Liaison Officer be allowed to remain at or near the dropping area.“ Requesting Kveder's personal intervention, Moore said he felt sure Kveder would agree that „such obstruction from your authorities in IX Corps is intolerable when our Air Forces are making such great efforts to supply your forces there“. He added a hint that supplies might be stopped; „our Air Forces are NOT (in capital letters) prepared to employ men and machines in attempting to supply your forces when so little co-operation for our representative at the receiving end is forthcoming“.

Moore admitted that bad weather had also contributed to the failure of sorties. But he chose his language evidently in order to give his protest the greatest possible effect. He had a good working relationship with Kveder. So did Major W. S. Pears, in charge of Flotsam after Moore left, who in a report dated 19 February 1945 wrote: „General Kveder seems to be a

good soldier and is reasonable and straightforward to deal with." Yet Darewski did not take to him, and had suspected Kveder of being the person who made trouble for him. It is strange how personal chemistry affects professional and military relationships; some people hit it off, others feel antagonism.

Moore's protest had its effect. A message received by Crayon via Bari on 22 January said Kveder had written to Moore confirming his despatch of a personal signal to IX Corps that the mission should be allowed to return to the neighbourhood of the dropping ground. What Moore did not know when he wrote was that the operation on the 18th had been successful, even if it was carried out by 66 aircraft – Liberators and Wellingtons – instead of the expected 95. Its success was reported later by Captain Lambie, the last BLO with Crayon, who added that it was followed on the 21st by drops from another 77. Most significantly, both operations took place for the first time not under cover of night, but in daylight. As Lambie pointed out, the mass daylight drops were a great boost to local morale, „as they constituted the first real show of Anglo-American support to the corps".

* * *

Considering the discrepancies often found in wartime reports within the same organisation – such as who really arrived in the same aircraft as Major Darewski — it is remarkable how far the recipients' accounts of those drops in January concur with those of the senders. The Slovenes were impressed that the British had made a massive effort. Reports from IX Corps back to HQ Slovenia are not far out in giving approximately the same number of sorties on these days. They counted 40 aircraft dropping – or intending to drop – on 8 January; 87 on the 15th; „many" on the 16th; 65 on the 18th; 40 on the 19th; 18 on the 20th; and 27 (morning) plus 35 (afternoon) on the 21st. Among that first group of 40, all of whom were prevented by bad weather from releasing their loads, was a Wellington piloted by a Flight Lieutenant Paul Gaunt which crash landed on the border between Slovenia and Croatia. Gaunt and the crew were rescued by Partizans, who tended them and sent them on the evacuation route via Croatia to southern Italy; the act resulted in bonds of friendship with Gaunt's family, who in later years came to Slovenia to visit the rescuers.

Unfortunately when the planes did drop, the Slovenes complained that their loads were often scattered far and wide. The German and Domobranci forces also lit fires and were able to gather – so the Slovene reports said – much of the arms, ammunition and clothing sent from Bari. This did nothing to improve the atmosphere between the commissar and the British mission; suspicions were voiced whether this was deliberate. IX Corps signalled HQ Slovenia that the civil population was beginning to wonder whether the British had changed sides and were now supporting the White Guards or collaborationist Domobranci. A divisional commander in IX Corps asked whether the codes of the British had been stolen or cracked, so that the Germans knew where to expect drops, or whether perhaps there was treachery. Altogether, that month of all-out activity by the RAF probably benefited the enemy as much as the Partizans.

What is clear from Slovene documents, however, is that Kveder acted on Moores complaint and gave IX Corps a kick in the pants. „Why the devil do you not allow the British liaison officer to be near the dropping ground?“ he signalled them on 15 January. „With such a »sectarian« policy you just give them arguments.“

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In February the British effort continued, though on a reduced scale, due partly to bad weather. In that month 32 sorties were successful, once more however at night. Lambie noted that the Germans immediately to the north and south lit fires in an attempt to confuse the pilots and get the supplies themselves – there was a mutually agreed system between missions and base of fire plans based on changing letter patterns reinforced by torch signals to the pilot. The Germans attempts were not successful „although they did cause us a great deal of worry“. These drops did something to alleviate the urgent need of the JANL forces, expanded now by an inflow of conscripts, for arms and ammunition, clothing and food. The contrast could not have been greater with the experience of Darewski, whose presence the Partizans had wanted for the precise purpose of organising and delivering supplies; yet who in four months had not received a single drop.

Gibb’s difficulties, however, were not at an end with the dropping zone incident. Normally, British missions received a certain amount of information from the Partizans about their activities and intentions, though BLOs complained that it was often limited and inadequate. But on 18 January 1945 Gibb signalled that the commissar was refusing him all information about troops of the corps operating in the area – north-east Italy for the British, north-west Jugoslavia for the Slovenes – on the grounds that such matters could only be discussed at Tito’s GHQ. The commissar maintained that he was acting under orders. Though this was not mentioned in the exchanges of signals with base, it was clear that the questions of Trieste and the future boundary with Italy were now dominating attitudes at Tito’s GHQ, which had instructed lower formations to clam up on information to the Anglo-Americans.

The documents available convey the impression that Gibb may have been underrated by his superiors and not given his proper due. He always appeared to be the number two. First, to Watson; though the one was in SOE and the other in ISLD, they had worked as a team, using the same contacts and sharing the same information, to the point of Gibb passing Watson's radio messages in the weeks of his interdiction and expulsion. Together, they saw the disappearance of common Slovene contacts and restrictions placed on other British in their area. Gibb’s signals show that he maintained a firm and resolute attitude during this difficult time. He furthermore provided a solid point of contact for the local representative of A Force, who was similarly under harassment by the commissar. But Gibb was only a captain and had been junior to Watson as a major.

Then in mid-January 1945 Captain Lambie of the Royal Engineers arrived via Moore at HQ Slovenia and took over mission Crayon. „You will remain as second in command“. Bari’s instruction to Gibb was unequivocal. Suggestions were made to Bari that Lambie should at

least be given the local rank of major, as both Watson and his intended successor in ISLD were majors and the Partizans would have the impression that the SOE officers were under ISLD command. But no, Bari maintained its position. Crayon was to be manned for the time being by two captains, one subordinate to the other.

With hindsight, it all looked like a storm in a teacup, because Gibb had been there for nearly five months and Bari decided that it was now time to withdraw him. He received an evacuation order at the end of January and left straightway for HQ Slovenia. Why was there such a fuss about who would be in charge, just for two weeks? In passing, it could be noted that Gibb was not from one of the „smart" regiments, which had supplied numerous BLOs; nor was he an engineer, like Lambie, Moore, or Wood, whose skills in demolition and sabotage were obviously in demand. Gibb was a gunner, as the Royal Artillery was called, in an area where his hosts had no more than a handful of captured enemy cannons.

Even if his technical expertise was little needed, however, his political reporting was clear and to the point. Something of what he wrote might seem a little obvious in the light of later events, but it was by no means generally accepted at the time. Firstly, like some other but not all BLOs, he was under no illusions as to the Communist nature of the Partizan leadership and their revolutionary ambitions. His personal experiences had borne witness to that. While he had respect for the intense patriotism and moderation of a few civilian leaders like France Bevk and Joža Vilfan – the latter was to become private secretary to Tito in the 1950s – he felt that they carried little weight against the likes of the commissar, Viktor Avbelj, „a shrewd and uncompromising Communist politician". Gibb saw where the Partizan movement was leading. „The original broad left-wing basis of the Partizan movement in Primorska has in practice been narrowed and now Communist control is virtually complete", he wrote in a report dated 26 February 1945. Then: „There is a secret political police force; justice is arbitrary: elections by democratic standards a mockery; opponents of Communism, although loyal Partizans, dare not express their views in public."

In an earlier report dated 10 December 1944 Gibb noted that there was considerable goodwill among the population towards the British and Americans. But „this goodwill is curbed by discouraging and in certain cases actually forbidding people from talking with members of the British Mission".

Gibb realized that the „ill concealed hostility and petty insults" to which members of British and American missions were subjected by certain – though not all – senior Partizan leaders were caused by what he called the unsettled frontier problem with Italy. He analysed Slovene objectives and territorial claims that covered all areas where Slovenes were living and in part of Friuli extended as far west as the River Tagliamento. To strengthen their position, the Slovene Partizans needed to emasculate the Italian resistance forces, which in Gibb's view had been operating with considerable success to their west. These consisted of anti-Communist Osovani of the Osoppo[1] movement and of pro-Communist or at least left-wing Garibaldini. Gibb gave an account of how, from his vantage point, it looked as if the Slovene Partizans split the Garibaldini from the Osovani; this operation may have been finalised, he thought, at a celebration of the October Revolution by the Soviet mission to IX Corps in early

November, which was attended by Vanni (real name, Giovanni Padoan), the Garibaldini commissar.

The Partizans took, as Gibb wrote, to „trumping up charges“ against Osoppo units of collaborating with the enemy and disarmed Osovani whenever they came into contact with them. Incidents were „deliberately misrepresented“, to the point of commissar Avbelj alleging to Gibb that the Osoppo units had made a non-aggression pact with the enemy and that Major Macpherson, a SOE BLO with them, had even written to the local Osoppo commander telling him not to attack the Udine – Tarvisio railway line to Austria.

On the contrary, it was IX Corps that Gibb saw as lacking an offensive spirit. He himself had never been allowed to watch a military operation, and he considered many of their claimed successes to be exaggerated and in some cases untrue. They were conscripting as many young men as they could and he believed that their concern was to build up a national army for the future rather than to fight against the enemy of the present. Recent actions appeared to have the object of obtaining food for all these people. „Their approach to military problems has become defensive, concerned more with the question of how they can maintain themselves than with the question of how they can hurt the enemy.“

In his final recommendations, therefore, Gibb called for more support for the Italian Osoppo formations, in an attempt to rebuild non-Communist military organisations and to redress the balance in favour of what he considered to be more reasonable political elements. As for the Slovenes, he proposed „that no further arms be sent to IX Corps“ except mortars; the latter would offset their lack of artillery. Supplies should be confined to explosives, clothing, boots, medical stores, food for hospitals, and the like.

There was thus this ironic situation at the start of 1945. Those arranging supplies at SOE’s base in southern Italy were prepared to send all kinds of stores on a generous scale; the BLO on the spot wanted only limited and selected dispatch; and the commissar, aided sometimes by the weather, made the receipt of what was sent as difficult as possible.

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While Avbelj accused the Osoppo command of negotiating a non-aggression pact with the enemy, the Partizans themselves had not been averse a few months earlier to contacts leading in the same direction. These contacts are described in a history of OZNA in Slovenia by Ljuba Dornik Šubelj on the basis of reports in Slovene government archives. The initial approach was made in summer 1944 by the civil authorities of Gorizia placed under the German *Adriatisches Kuestenland* or Adriatic Coastland administration; notably by Count Mario Pace, the prefect. and Baron Pino Locatelli Hagenauer, sub-prefect with responsibility for food and agriculture. The food situation for the civil population was serious – as it was for the Partizans – and they wanted a truce to enable supplies to be organised. Clandestine talks were held with Partizan representatives, including a local representative of their security services, Zdenko Zavadlav, on 15 and 26 June. Terms for a truce were discussed and agreed. It came into effect in July and, in the words of Dornik Šubelj, lasted „at most some 14 days“.

Meanwhile contacts continued, but there were increasing reservations among some people in authority on both sides. At Partizan initiative a further meeting was held on Partizan territory on 11 September, after which Pace and Locatelli and their party were told by the Partizans that they were under arrest. What was to be done with them? At IX Corps headquarters Avbelj was quoted as being among those who wanted their liquidation, on the grounds of their being agents of the Gestapo. In the event it was decided to take them to HQ Slovenia.

While being escorted into the interior of Slovenia both Pace and Locatelli escaped from the Partizans on successive days and were picked up by the German security service which took them to Trieste. But the other members of their party were executed. Zavadlav was later transferred to Štajerska and, after the war, interrogated about his relations with Pace; they had known each other before the war. It is doubtful if the British missions with IX Corps heard about the affair though reports of it were picked up by British authorities abroad.

17.
Chalk And Cheese

In short, then, it looked to Gibb as if the Slovenes had deliberately enticed the Garibaldini under their command; perhaps, indeed, at Soviet instigation. In this way the Slovenes split the Italian Partizan forces and strengthened their hand for territorial claims in north-east Italy after the war. They rubbed salt into the split by making accusations; that the Osoppo units did not now want to fight; that they had gone over to collaborating with the enemy: and that their British liaison officers even encouraged collaboration. How did this look from the Italian side?

* * *

The Allied generals who fought the war up the Italian peninsular never really took to Partizans. They would have not have believed their ears had they heard the tributes paid by the Italian republic in the decades after the war to *La Resistenza* as the force that freed the nation from fascism. For to the Allied commanders a democratic Italian state owed its existence not to guerrillas behind the lines but to their own Anglo-American military conquest of the peninsula. Many who had already been in the Western Desert thought the Italians were not to be taken seriously as fighters; the performance in Africa of „the Wops“, as they were nicknamed, had been dismal, marked by insipid leadership and inferior equipment. At best, they were now designated as co-belligerents.

By force of events the Resistance was limited, in extent, to the northern half of the country and, in time, to the 20 months between the surrender in September 1943 and the end of the war. Politically, resisters were against the monarchy and for a republic. This in itself was distasteful, particularly to the British, who were sheltering at Brindisi a king they continued to support as the rightful ruler, despite the feeling of many Italians that in a precipitate and undignified flight from Rome he had deserted them and the ship of state.

Partizans set a problem for the Allies when they were strong enough to seize an area of territory. They would establish a civil administration, which would not be organised along the lines prescribed by Allied Military Government. Then from the military point of view the commitment of Partizan resources to setting up a liberated territory was unwise, as the Germans could amass forces to enter and suppress it whenever they wanted. The best known example, the „Domodossola Republic“ covering an area adjoining Switzerland from the Simplon pass to the upper reaches of Lake Maggiore was allowed by the Germans to last for only 34 days between September and October 1944. If Allied strategy was to achieve its objectives, Partizans needed to be held on a leash, obedient to Allied directives, and should concentrate on the provision of intelligence and on certain coordinated acts of sabotage.

But the Resistance forced itself on Allied support, both by its seizure of territory and actions against the Germans, and by its help in enabling Allied escaped prisoners of war to reach safety either in Switzerland or across the battle line in the peninsula. Since the war its

contribution to the war effort has been revalued. The distinguished historian Denis Mack Smith has written that the war of liberation against Hitler and Mussolini penetrated much more deeply into people's consciences than the nineteenth century *Risorgimento* or process of national unification ever did. Already in 1948 William Mackenzie, author of an in-house history of SOE for the British cabinet office, had described the Italian as one of the greatest Resistance movements in the West, second only to that of France. But his appraisal was not known to the general public, since his book was covered by official secrecy and only released for publication in 2000.

So, faced by the reality of the Resistance, the Allies did their best to bring it to heel and sent in a, in their view, trustworthy Italian general to take charge – nominally, at least – of the unified Resistance high command in Milan. The command comprised both the Communists and the non-Communist democratic parties, among whom the *Partito d Azione* or Action Party was prominent. On the ground the Communists or „reds" and the non-Communists or „greens" often maintained separate units. SOE, most of whose activities here were organised under the name of Number 1 Special Force, sent in missions and supplies to them. And the Allies, when they liberated territory, lost no time in disarming the local Partizans and sending them home.

* * *

The nearest to Slovene IX Corps of BLOs accredited to Italian Partizans was Major Hedly Vincent, who used the battle name of Major Tucker. In fact he arrived via IX Corps, dropping together with a British sergeant and a British radio operator to the Clowder party at Čepovan – Chiapovano in Italian – on the night of 9/10 June 1944; the same night as Major Wood came to take over Crayon, though it is not recorded if they met each other. The route via IX Corps was often used for arrivals and departures by British missions to Italian Partizans in north-east Italy as an alternative to more risky local pick-ups by Lysander light aircraft. The dispatch of Vincent was designated as Operation Sermon and his mission went by the name of Coolant.

Vincent was impressed by the Slovene commanders and commissars. „I learnt to respect the determination of this tough race in its bid for freedom", he wrote in his mission report. The officers „are very brave men, cold and uncompromising, determined to fight for their rights which they define in exaggerated terms".

After several days Vincents mission struck off west to join Italian Partizans, first a left-wing Garibaldini unit quartered in a very poor village in the hilly Collio (Brdo in Slovene) area north-west of Gorizia. Then he moved with them into the foothills and first mountains of the Alps that rise from the plain north-east of Udine, the main town of Friuli. It was good Partizan country: wooded, with an excellent dropping ground on the gentle and bare summit slopes of 1.168 metre Mount Joanaz. His territory reached down to the agricultural villages of Faedis, Attimis and Nimis on the edge of the plain. Here there were already Osovani from the „green" non-Communist Osoppo movement. Osovani and Garibaldini could not have been more different than chalk from cheese.

„I found a complete lack of collaboration, amounting almost to hostility, between the rival factions“, Vincent wrote. „The differences in history, discipline and internal administration of the formations linked with class distinctions between leaders of the Osoppo and those of the Garibaldini accounted for this state of affairs which no one seemed willing to adjust.“ Vincent nevertheless set himself to „adjusting“ their relations and got them to agree to a unified command, on a basis of equality between the two groups; the outcome was the formation of *Divisione Garibaldi Osoppo Natisone* (the last word being the name of the local river), consisting of two Garibaldini brigades and one Osoppo brigade. On 20 September Major Tom Rowarth (cover name Major Nicholson) dropped to Vincent with mission Bakersfield and set off to become Vincent's neighbour to the west. Rowarth found a similar situation, and managed also to achieve a unified command. To the east were the Slovenes under IX Corps.

Vincent reported that he persuaded commanders in the unified division to agree to work along the lines of Western Allied directives. They were left undisturbed in their occupation of villages and hillsides for nearly two months by Germans and by Cossacks, who were now arriving in the plain below. During this time the unified division actively harassed the enemy with local attacks and acts of sabotage, while supply drops were received and troops were trained. Vincent got a small factory working to produce explosive and grenades and organised an intelligence network that reached into Udine itself.

To the Germans, mosquito stings looked like becoming snake bites; their toleration of this activity clearly could not last. The enemy launched an expected offensive on 27 September, employing superior forces in a frontal attack from the west; while in the rear to the east, which was being protected by Slovene Partizans, German troops arrived by lorry from Kobarid. In heavy fighting, the Garibaldini managed to extricate themselves with losses, while the Osoppo units received a bad mauling. There was no cooperation from the Slovenes, who did not take part. In Vincent's words: „The Slovenes, who had recently been placed under new commanders from IX Corps, refused fight and withdrew without firing a shot.“ The Osovani complained that they had been left in the lurch. Similar words to Vincent's were used by the Osovano „Ermes“ (Guido Pasolini) in a letter to his brother Pier Paolo Pasolini, later famed as a poet and film director; on an earlier occasion, Ermes wrote, a Slovene unit had failed to support them in an attack by Germans and Fascists on 29 July: then, in the night of 27/28 September, „we were nearly surrounded ... The Slovenes assigned to protect our rear retired without firing a shot.“

From the Slovene side, the historian of IX Corps Zdravko Klanjšček was altogether more bland in his description of the Slovene behaviour. Their Gregorčič Brigade had received information that the enemy was preparing a major offensive against the Italian Partizans. „To avoid this, it withdrew on 26 September towards Hlodič...“ Its 4th Battalion, however, was still operating on the territory, and „together with an Italian company held its position till nightfall, then in the face of overwhelming force withdrew to the north ... and thus avoided more serious losses. But the Italian division suffered a heavy defeat... Its first two brigades (i.e. the Garibaldini) succeeded in escaping from encirclement, but the Osoppo were late and were surrounded and broken up.“

The commanders of the depleted and battered Osoppo and Garibaldini forces managed to reorganise their units. But any feeling of mutual trust between „reds“ and „greens“ nurtured by the British mission had been lost. The unified command broke down.

General Alexander, the British commander-in-chief of the Allied forces in Italy, then happened to intervene in what proved to be the last straw in any hope of preserving an Osoppo – Garibaldini alliance. It was autumn, and Alexander's troops in the Apennines had already been weakened by the Americans taking away from him several divisions for the landing in the south of France. His attempts to break through the German Gothic defence line and liberate Bologna had failed. A further attempt would have to be postponed till the spring. During the forthcoming winter of relative quiet it would, in the Allied high command's thinking, be useless for the Partizans to expose themselves; they would only risk casualties and possible annihilation. In their own interest, therefore, they should cut down their activities and preserve their arms and resources till the Allies' final breakthrough.

A directive or „proclamation“ by Alexander to this effect was broadcast by radio and of course was heard by the Germans as well as the Partizans. It was ill received at the Milan-based Partizan high command, as it was all too clear that the Germans would take advantage of this period of quiet to increase their forces assigned to eliminate the Partizan „bandits“.

In Friuli the proclamation coincided with an enforced change of tactics anyhow. As Vincent related in his report, the enemy offensive at the end of September had shown it was not possible to continue operating as before. The emphasis would now have to be on sabotage and not on aggressive clashes with the enemy. Fewer men would be required. Those who were retained had to eat – with less liberated territory, food was becoming a problem. Unneeded men would have to be sent home.

The Osoppo commander Bolla – real name, Francesco De Gregori, a regular Italian army captain from the Alpini mountain troops – complied with the new course, and sent most of his men on indefinite leave in the New Year. On the other hand the Garibaldini did not accept the situation. They said they did not intend to send their men home and were not prepared to refrain from attacking the enemy.

Informal feelers had been put out in mid-September by a Slovene officer about combining under joint command and the Garibaldini now took this contact further. A long signal from Vincent to base on 23 October described how the Garibaldini leaders had just then returned from IX Corps „where they were received with open arms by the Slovenes and the Russian mission there“. The Garibaldini had been considering what their position would be once the Western Allies arrived. „News from the South has convinced them that no efforts are being made to purge ex-Fascist and reactionary elements and in fact they are equally convinced that the Allies favour these elements...“ Furthermore, „news that Partizans in zones occupied by the Allies had been disarmed and dissolved has caused criticism and resentment“. They realised that as long as they operated as Italian Partizans under direction of the north Italian National Liberation Committee they had to conform to directives issued by the Allied Command. „They therefore made an approach to the Slovenes with a view to being placed operationally under their command and thus in a position to accept orders only through Tito.“

The Garibaldini officers were at that moment discussing whether to enter this alliance; Osoppo had decided it would not. „A merger with Tito's forces has as its object a guarantee of independence once the Allies arrive." Vincent ended his signal by saying that the Slovenes, in their territorial aspirations towards north-east Italy, were stepping up propaganda and recruitment by force as far west as the River Tagliamento; but among the population the „Slovene attitude is resented and feared."

Such was the situation as Vincent saw it at that time. In fact there was more behind these contacts than had met the eye of either Vincent or Gibb. Evidence from Slovene sources indicates that the two Communist Parties had been in touch over the possibility of Italian Garibaldini coming under Slovene command since as far back as November 1943 – a year earlier. Branko Babič, who had been appointed local secretary of the underground Slovene Communist Party organisation in Trieste at the end of 1942, relates in his autobiography that he attended two meetings between representatives of the two liberation movements on 12 and 22 November 1943. Both meetings were lively; as at other wartime discussions between the two Communist Parties, the Italians refused to accept Slovene claims to Trieste. At the second meeting the talk „was also this time pretty stormy and hot, but we agreed that Italian units which come into Slovene lands must submit to operational command of the National Liberation Army of Slovenia, (and must) respectively announce themselves and respect our authority in that area." At that time, little appears to have come of this; Kardelj himself then took up the matter in a letter dated 9 September 1944 to the Italian Communist Party's representative in the Littoral (Primorska), at the same time as the Garibaldini were receiving informal feelers on the ground. In the letter Kardelj wrote: „All units that are situated in that area (i.e. the Primorska) must be only under the command of IX Corps. The reason for our demanding this is that we do not wish to allow any Partizan units in the area to be disarmed by the Allies." Kardelj also reiterated that in the Slovene view the city of Trieste belonged to Slovenia.

In the event, the Garibaldini leaders decided to accept Slovene command. Their commissar Giovanni Padoan (battle name Vanni) – Babi had reported him as attending the earlier 12 November 1943 meeting – has written that this decision had the approval of Palmiro Togliatti, the Italian Communist Party secretary, on the understanding however that it would not compromise the post-war future of the Primorska. In December therefore the Garibaldini leaders brought their forces eastwards across the Soča River. Once in the interior of Slovenia they were in unfamiliar country and the spirits of many rank and file fell. The population in this new area had no reason to like Italians and they could no longer count on local support, so important for the morale of a guerrilla-based movement. At the end of January, Crayon mission reported, about 30 Garibaldini were so dissatisfied that they deserted to the Germans. Their action could not have been less wise, for the Germans shot them out of hand.

Vincent was called back to base soon after sending his long signal, leaving on 26 October via IX Corps. Due to the course of events, he had spent much of his time with Garibaldini units, whom he considered better and tougher fighters than the Osovani. The Garibaldini commissars, he noted, instilled into their men something of their crusading spirit for a new

and better society. The Osovani copied them by appointing commissars, „keen, sincere men, some members of the Partito d'Azione, some of the Democrazia Cristiana party" – but they compared unfavourably. They represented democratic parties of differing views, which basically did not want a change in the social order. „In the Osoppo ranks the Partizans were the same material but showed more frequently a weakness in adversity which could have been corrected by a more virile and clear cut propaganda from their superiors."

In his return through IX Corps Vincent noted the change of attitude towards the British produced by commissar Avbelj. On his arrival in June, Slovene officers had been „polite, guarded and dutiful". Now he noticed „marked suspicion, distrust and almost non-cooperation".

* * *

Major Vincents successor as head of Coolant mission was Major R. T. S. (Tom) Macpherson MC of the Cameron Highlanders, who dropped on 4 November 1944. Events dictated that he should be in closer contact with Osovani than with Garibaldini, though he continued with the policy of trying to get them to collaborate. Macpherson esteemed the Osoppo chief Bolla who, as he wrote in a letter to Major Rowarth dated 7 February 1945, had worked very loyally with him and was by far the most competent of the Osoppo commanders he knew.

During these last months of the war several advances were made to the Osovani by Germans and Cossacks for a local truce or non-aggression pact. An approach from a German officer is mentioned by Captain Patrick Martin Smith, one of Colonel Wilkinson's Clowder team in Carnia further to the west. Martin Smith makes plain that the Osovani turned it down. Approaches from Cossacks were reported from other sources also; one can be seen in black and white, written in Russian, on the PRO files in London. Undated, it proposes that the Cossacks should come over and fight shoulder to shoulder with the Anglo-Americans, with the proviso however that they should be granted the right to national self-determination.

The Osovani rejection of these advances is confirmed by two BLOs, Lieutenants R. G. Taylor and R. D. Godwin, who had arrived on 13 August in Operation Sermon II as a sub-mission to Vincent, to specialise in sabotage and demolition. In a report dated 8 March 1945 they wrote:

> We believe it would have been possible to arrange a non-aggression pact with the local Cossacks. The only time this was suggested to the Osoppo commander he flatly refused to have anything to do with the idea... There has never been any attempt on the part of the Osoppo to establish any agreement whatsoever with any enemy forces.

What the Osovani had done however was to infiltrate their men into a local defence force or home guard, the *Guardia Civica*, promoted by the archbishop of Udine. Macpherson reported: „They refuse to wear the fascio (the fascist badge), but are clothed and armed by

the Duce. They take their orders from the Gruppo Osoppo dell' Est command." He added that they had already had three successful skirmishes with foraging parties of Cossacks.

Meanwhile relations between Osoppo on the one hand and Garibaldini and Slovenes on the other continued to deteriorate. Macpherson, in a letter to an unnamed friend at base dated February 1945, wrote that the Slovenes „with malice aforethought and automatic weapons" had recently surrounded the Osoppo HQ, but he had persuaded them to „be good boys and go home". Then the previous night they had left a series of signposts marked „To the Osoppo brigade" extending from 200 yards away from the nearest Cossack garrison to 350 yards from the Osoppo door. „Fortunately our patrol found them first, but the game is sure to be tried in other forms."

It was, a week later, in an altogether more drastic form. Bolla had his headquarters at a *malga* – a summer hut or bothy for foresters and herdsmen – nearly 1.000 metres up at a locality called Porzus, guarded by those of his men who had not gone home and were now reduced to about a platoon in strength. His anti-communism was well known and he had been foremost among those who opposed coming under Slovene command like the Garibaldini; it was reported locally that because of his uncompromising attitude his own superiors had decided to transfer him elsewhere, to a less controversial area. On 7 February, however, he and his men – 19 of them – together with a girl alleged to be a spy were all assassinated by a squad in superior numbers who came for that purpose. Among the dead was „Ermes", brother of Pier Paolo Pasolini, mentioned above. The killers were a group of Friuli Garibaldini commanded by Giacca, battle name for Mario Toffanin. It was a premeditated attack; ordered by the Garibaldini? By the underground Communist Party? Or by the Slovene command?

After the war the event ignited a bitter controversy. It was singled out in Italy as an atrocity and was used as a weapon in anti-Slav campaigns by Italian nationalists. Trials were held in Italy (in absentia) of those responsible or allegedly responsible. A film was made. The episode undoubtedly left a nasty taste in the mouth, though it was by no means the sole event of its kind among resistance forces in the lawlessness of Nazi occupied Europe.

* * *

To sum up: two views thus exist on why the Garibaldini went under IX Corps command: as a result of Slovene pressure, and on their own initiative. Evidence is available that points both ways. The Slovenes were undoubtedly keen to receive them, but at the same time the Garibaldini themselves were profoundly out of step with the Western Allied command and – the commanders at least – wanted to go.

In that last winter Alexander's directive had ordered Partizans to „go slow", though not of course at the price of truce or accords with the enemy. Garibaldini policy on the other hand was officially – whatever the impressions of those on the spot – to continue attacking the enemy. After the war they did not want to be disbanded and sent home, as Vincent put it in one of his signals, „without so much as a thank you". Garibaldini policy was at variance with

that of the Allies. BLOs however still tried to persuade Garibaldini and Osovani not to break their bridges.

As for Osoppo collaboration, the Osovani did receive approaches, which meant contact with the enemy. They went so far as to worm their men into a force paid by the enemy such as the Udine *Guardia Civica*. But the evidence of BLOs is that they rejected collaboration as such. In war, as in life itself, events can seldom be painted in black and white. And enough events were coloured grey to arouse understandable suspicion in Slovene minds. As the Italian saying goes, *„Non c 'é fumo senza arrosto"* – there's no smoke without fire.

18.
In The Bag

Captain J. C. Lambie of the Royal Engineers, the last effective head of Crayon mission, had the misfortune to be the only British liaison officer in Slovenia to end up in enemy hands as a prisoner of war. He arrived in January 1945 to take over from Gibb, who as already stated remained under his command. Here, as with Darewski, there is a slight discrepancy as to the day. Lambie in a report submitted after the war said that after leaving HQ Slovenia on the 9th he had a slow journey through deep snow and reached Crayon on the 18th; Slovene sources gave it as the 20th. The British mission was then in the village of Labinje, two kilometres from Cerkno and one kilometre from corps HQ in another village, Poljane. Slattery of A Force was still there and so was Craig of ISLD: it is significant that Avbelj had not had them expelled, along with Watson.

Soon, on 7 February, they were joined by an American, Lieutenant Daniel Desich, at the head of OSS mission Alum, together with a radio operator and two interpreters. Desich had been in Jugoslavia since the summer and arrived from HQ Slovenia. The Americans, it will be recalled, did not have anyone from OSS present at the farewell dinner for Watson the previous autumn, but had been represented by a shot-down air force officer. Desich stayed only for a few weeks; he returned to HQ Slovenia at the end of March for evacuation.

A few weeks before his capture Lambie sent a report to Lieutenant Colonel Moore, the head of mission with HQ Slovenia. Dated 10 March, it was written apparently from the – at that moment – security of IX Corps HQ near Cerkno. He paints a picture of the Germans being on the offensive; in the preceding weeks they had conducted sweeps, particularly across the Forest of Trnovo. The Partizans had however succeeded with various acts of sabotage in disrupting, at least temporarily, German rail and road communications in the corps area.

By now Moore's intervention at HQ Slovenia had had some effect and military collaboration with the Partizans was much improved. Besides staging more frequent drops, the RAF gave useful support to the Partizans during the German sweeps by strafing their strongholds though, unfortunately, on one occasion a militarily unoccupied village was attacked too and several Slovene civilians were killed. The corps intelligence officer was at last providing some information and had even allowed him to interrogate some German prisoners, including a military doctor on his way to cope with a typhus epidemic that had broken out among collaborationist forces in Postojna (Postumia).

Nevertheless, Lambie had to report a disturbing event. Though overall relations with the commissar and staff were now described as good, there had been „a certain amount of friction“ in previous weeks. During drops in the period 20 to 26 February, containers with supplies for the mission had several times been stolen and mail for its members including official letters had been burned.

Lambie made a „strong complaint“ to Avbelj, the commissar, who set up a tribunal of six members to investigate the incident and to try any suspects. Like Gibb, Lambie saw Avbelj

in a different light from the American Lindsay, who had felt he was a friend when both were in Štajerska. „An extreme Communist“, Lambie wrote, Avbelj was „in my opinion a man not to be trusted“. He was „small, dark and very suave“ and never gave a direct answer if any other could be thought up. On the other hand the recently appointed (5 January) corps commander, Jože Borštnar, did not appear to Lambie to be a political figure. A „dour, taciturn man“, he had been a captain in the old Jugoslav army and was a first-class soldier, but „took little part in the political meetings so dear to the hearts of the others“. Again, Lambie differed in his appreciation to Lindsay and possibly may have misread Borštnar. For Borštnar had a political past; he was political commissar when Lindsay arrived in Štajerska, and Lindsay thought him anti-American and anti-British, suspicious and bureaucratic and far from easy to work with. This tandem of command, Borštnar – Avbelj, was however short lived, for on 26 March Avbelj was posted to HQ Slovenia; the new commissar was called Dragomir Benčič – Brkin.

All this time Craig had been holding the fort for ISLD and was waiting to be relieved by Watson's successor, Major Lyle Smythe. From January the dropping ground at Čepovan was kept open to receive Lyle Smythe but no sortie came, then in the second week of February the Germans occupied it. In the end Lyle Smythe had to make his way via HQ Slovenia and arrived from there on 16 March, enabling Craig to leave for evacuation.

A few days after making his complaint Lambie was informed that the culprit responsible for the looting of the containers had been found; he was none other than the officer at Corps HQ appointed to liaise with him. Once more, as already in the difficult period encountered by Gibb in the autumn, there was a change of Slovene staff charged with maintaining contacts with the mission. This officer, Lambie reported on 10 March, had now „disappeared“, while four other Partizans aiding him were shot. Such were the realities of war, especially of irregular war, when stealing and killing take on different connotations from what we are accustomed in the peacetime conditions of today.

* * *

Lambie, like Gibb, could not steer clear of the diplomatic minefield posed by the presence of Italian Partizans in the IX Corps area and in the adjoining Friuli. Officially, British officers were under orders not to get involved in political arguments, especially regarding frontiers. Such instructions were easy to give and less easy to observe, but Lambie appears to have been skilful in avoiding trouble. He met the same allegations, made in particular by commissar Avbelj, about the Osoppo Partizans being nothing but collaborators with the Germans and about the British concurring in their adopting a passive and even collaborationist attitude; Lambie reported these allegations factually to base without comment.

Lambie also collected information to try to throw light on the case of Corporal Trent, who had been with Italian Partizans. He had been dropped with the sub-mission of Taylor and Godwin and in their report was described as being on „general duties“. Vincent later used him as a photographer. Rumoured to be of central European origin – and thus potentially an object of particular suspicion – Trent was with a group of Osovani who strayed in December 1944

into territory held by a Slovene Partizan detachment in the Resia (Rezija) valley. The inhabitants of this remote Alpine valley, isolated by mountains from the Soča's upper reaches to the east, were Italian subjects who spoke an old Slovene dialect. The Partizans questioned Trent's credentials and insisted that he be escorted to IX Corps HQ. On the way, after crossing the Soča, shots were fired at the party, killing Trent. The Partizans said it was a German ambush; but rumours circulated that Trent had been got rid of by the Partizans. Lambie sent to Bari detailed depositions taken by a Slovene inquiry from the individual Partizans involved, who naturally maintained their innocence. But the issue remained open.

* * *

The „Garibaldi-Natisone" division is described by Slovene historians as playing an important part in the fighting of the last winter and spring of the war; its numbers varied, but they were given as substantially more than 1.000 fighting men. Vincent had made a rough estimate of 15.000 in Friuli, but this was probably exaggerated and was in any case made before some dispersed to their homes and the remainder crossed the Soča eastwards to come under Slovene command.

Official or authorised Slovene accounts speak of excellent collaboration and mutual trust. More than once the Garibaldini units suffered heavy losses and had to be reformed. On the other hand Italian anti-communist opinion disparaged the Garibaldini, regarding them as being completely subservient to their Slovene masters. These, it was pointed out, did not even allow them to participate in the final thrust to liberate Trieste.

British officers' reports speak of a relationship that accords with neither mutual trust nor complete subservience. What Lambie noticed was „increasing signs of friction" between Garibaldini and Slovenes. The Italians were inclined to talk about the Slovenes with a measure of contempt and considered themselves to be a cut above them.

The existence of divergences has been emphasised by their commissar Vanni, particularly in more recent years – he was still alive and active at the turn of the century. In a letter to the Trieste newspaper *Il Piccolo* of 2 December 1999, Vanni wrote that as far back as 13 November 1943 at the meeting between representatives of the two Communist Parties he spoke against Slovene „annexionist claims" to the area. He and Sasso (Mario Fantini), commander of the Garibaldi-Natisone division, repeated their opposition to the claims at a meeting with the corps commissar Rudi (Viktor Avbelj) in October 1944 – the period when the Garibaldini were discussing coming under Slovene command. Then again at the end of the war differences arose with the Slovene town commander, General Dušan Kveder, during the 40-day Jugoslav occupation of Trieste. Sasso and he, Vanni added, had also protested on specific points, such as the Italian population not being allowed to hang out their national red-white-green tricolour, and the daubing of houses with slogans like *„Trst je naš"* (Trieste is ours).

* * *

Broadly speaking, IX Corps appears to have been in a position to take offensive action when it wanted till the second half of December. After that the initiative passed to the Germans, who launched a crescendo of attacks till the very last weeks of the war.

From autumn 1944 onwards the Partizans faced an increasingly serious problem in supplying their men. They had mobilised the able-bodied ones and by now could often provide them with arms, even if ammunition was not abundant. But above all they had to feed them – a problem shared with the occupying power, as shown by the Pace initiative. The objective behind Partizan operations often went no further than that of obtaining food or keeping commissariat lines open and staying in being till the victory now visible on the horizon.

For the Germans this area of mountains and woods behind Trieste was now of even greater importance. The Soviets were steamrollering their way from the east; Vienna was within their reach. In the Balkans the Germans were still holding the Srem front against the Jugoslavs, to the west of Belgrade. In the opposite direction the Western Allies were on the offensive again, to break out of the Apennines and cross the Po valley; and, of immediate concern, there was the much rumoured threat of an Allied landing in Istria or on the coast near Trieste. If the Germans were to meet such an event and hold north-east Italy, preparatory to withdrawing in good order to what their propaganda portrayed as an impregnable final stronghold in the Alpine fastness, it was essential for them to have their rear lines first cleared of the „bandits“ of the JANL. The threat of a landing had the effect of pinning down enemy forces in the area; and also of hardening Partizan resolve to be the first to capture Trieste, ahead of the Western Allies.

The calibre of the troops on both sides was varied. Many new Partizans were raw conscripts, without proper training. Against them were German or German-led units of infantry, SS police and *karstjaeger* or *„karst-hunters“*, together with a motley collection of Italian Republican Fascists, Slovene quislings (called SNVZ in the Trieste area, Domobranci in Slovenia proper), Cossacks, Caucasians and Turkmens, Četniks and quisling Serb forces („Ljotićevci“); local reports even spoke of Greek quislings and members of the SS „Blue“ division recruited from Franco's Spain. The Cossacks and Caucasians were a phenomenon unto themselves; already engaged in fighting Italian Partizans, they were a mixed bag of elderly ex-Tsarist officers, White Russian exiles from the Bolshevik revolution, and prisoners taken from the Soviet forces, who had been allowed by the Germans to occupy the Carnia area of northern Friuli – together with women, children and horses – and administer it pending a hoped for return home to an Axis-liberated Russia. But, irrespective of the nationality and military qualities of all these forces, fighting in that last period was fierce.

Between 7 February and 6 March the Germans carried out three offensives, or rather sweeps, across the Forest of Trnovo and along the northern edge of the Vipava valley. The aim was clearly to free the line of communication from Friuli and Gorizia to Ljubljana and thus guarantee the passage of stores and troops, and also to seize the dropping grounds for Allied supplies that in the last two months had been arriving on a greatly increased scale. In the latter objective the Germans, helped by bad weather, were successful, for Lambie reported only four drops in late March. These were food drops, at an improvised dropping ground called

Mrzla Rupa; everyone was famished – „the corps was on the verge of starvation“. The enemy offensives were named *Ruebezahi* 1, 2 and 3; each had a distinct beginning and end. Lambie gave an account of them in his 10 March report.

Then, as the outlook for the Axis became increasingly desperate, the Germans mounted an all-out offensive, lasting between 18 March and 4 or 5 April, and divided geographically in two sectors; *„Winterende“* (literally, Winter's End) in the Primorska north-east of Gorizia including the Trnovo Forest, and *„Fruehlingsanfang“* (literally, Beginning of Spring) further inside Slovenia between Cerkno and Škofja Loka. Both came near to success. Important Partizan units were surrounded and efforts for a cohesive defence were frustrated. Units had to break out on their own, often suffering heavy casualties.

Corps HQ with many of its troops was trapped in the mountains in an area some six kilometres across. All units were exhausted, hungry, and much reduced in strength from the recent fighting – battalions were down to an average 40 each. It was decided to break out through the ring of enemy forces during the night of 31 March/1 April. The forces were split into three columns; of these 31 Division and the Italian Garibaldini successfully escaped respectively to the south-east and the west.

It was then that Lambie was captured or, as the soldiers would say, put in the bag. Corps HQ with ancillary troops made for the north, and thereby walked into a trap. On each side of their escape route were enemy forces, waiting in ambush. On 1 April the Partizans suffered heavy casualties, losing several commanders killed. Corps HQ reported to HQ Slovenia „situation extremely serious“. The heads of both Allied missions had been wounded: the Soviet Lieutenant Colonel Ivan Ribachenko lightly, the British Captain Lambie more seriously. They were then near Vojsko, north of the Forest of Trnovo and west of Idrija.

Lambie’s account of his capture was dry and matter of fact. He was an officer writing a military report, not a letter to his family, and he allowed no emotion to emerge. The enemy force that set the ambush was from the 10th SS Police Regiment that had been stationed in the area for some time. Its men had had many encounters with the Partizans and knew the country well. They opened fire on the Partizans at dawn on 1 April and Lambie was wounded an hour later by a machine-gun burst. He does not give details of his wound, only saying that he was unable to move. Despite heavy machine-gun and mortar fire Lyle Smythe came back to see him but could do nothing and had to move on. Lambie realised that there was no alternative but to be picked up by the Germans; he tried nevertheless to crawl into a wood to hide, but was soon found. Initially, as long as he was in the hands of the fighting units, he was treated well, given food and his wound dressed. The next morning, ironically, he was wounded a second time when RAF Beaufighters rocketed the Police Regiment's HQ at Idrija where he was being held. This time he disclosed that the injury was in the right arm, but only slight.

Two days later Lambie was taken to Trieste and handed over to the Gestapo. When he told the Gestapo he would not give them information, he was stripped of his uniform, put into an underground cell measuring some 7 by 4 feet, left in total darkness and told he would be shot as a spy. This treatment lasted for ten or eleven days, during which he was given one meal a day and his wounds received no attention. Then, about 16 April – the end of the war

was clearly not far off – his captors told him he was being sent to a prison camp in Germany. There he remained for about three weeks till the camp was liberated by the Americans on 10 May. The war had ended.

* * *

Meanwhile the RAF did its best to support the Partizans in their retreat with bombing and strafing attacks. Then, battered and bruised, while reforming after surviving *Winterende*, the Partizans received some 50 tonnes of food dropped between 10 and 20 April. But, they complained, the British sent little ammunition, which was desperately needed; perhaps the British did not want to present the Partizans with too much firepower in the now imminent struggle for Trieste.

Rear HQ of Macmis – SOE's base in Bari – heard the news about Lambie several days after his capture. Major Lyall Smythe of ISLD was said to have survived the offensive and to be still with IX Corps, but SOE wanted someone to represent it in charge of the now decapitated Crayon mission. A signal was sent to Macmis with Tito's GHQ to ask permission for a Squadron Leader Derek Vinson to be dropped to IX Corps as his successor. Vinson was from ISLD, not SOE; but it mattered little in those hectic last weeks of the war. It was also planned to infiltrate a Captain Dixon to the nearest Partizan detachment to Trieste, giving his mission the name of Blofield, and putting it under command of Crayon. But events were moving too fast for these decisions to have any practical consequence. The Partizans entered Trieste on 1 May, followed by the New Zealand division from the west a day later.

Vinson arrived in Triste at the end of the war and was installed in an apartment in the red brick building at the entrance to the Canal Grande, known to the Triestini as the *grattacielo* or sky-scraper, though its height was decidedly modest by international standards. His arrival laid the foundation for a British connection, for the building later housed the consulate.

19.
Trst Or Trieste?

On 27 April IX Corps had been placed under operational command of Jugoslav Fourth Army for the final assault on Trieste. Fourth Army, under General Petar Drapšin, accomplished what must go down as one of the most daring exploits in military annals. If it had failed, military historians would have condemned it as ill-conceived, reckless and irresponsible; the operation certainly did not follow the rulebook of conventional warfare as taught at military academies. But it succeeded and the Jugoslavs won what for them was the supreme prize, capture on 1 May of Trieste; they arrived a day before General Sir Bernard Freyberg's 2nd New Zealand Division from the Eighth Army's XIII Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General John (later Field Marshal Lord) Harding. The New Zealanders had made all haste in an attempt to beat them from the west across the plains of the Veneto and Friuli. But they dallied for a night near Monfalcone to the west, in the hope of arranging a peaceful meeting with a Jugoslav commander, and thus let themselves be beaten to the post. These events have been vividly described in a book entitled *The Race for Trieste* by Geoffrey Cox, then an officer on the staff of the New Zealand division.

Fourth army was only put together as a formation on 2 March, its nucleus being the Dalmatian VIII Corps, to which several other divisions were added. Its tanks and modern equipment had been mainly supplied as aid by the British, tomorrow's prospective adversaries. In the dash for Trieste the Jugoslavs managed to cover some 250 miles in five weeks, along the mountainous, inhospitable Dalmatian coast, overhung by rugged mountains, studded with countless islands and bereft of modern communications. Their pace was much quicker than that of the more sophisticated Anglo-Americans, who since the previous autumn had let themselves get bogged down in the mountains of the Apennines. The speed of 4th Army's advance surprised the Jugoslavs themselves; they had expected to reach Trieste only towards the end of May.

One by one the enemy garrisons along the Adriatic coast fell. In the last ten days of April the Jugoslavs came up against their most formidable opponent, the German 97th Corps under General Ludwig Kuebler in the Rijeka area. Under his command, besides quisling forces, were two good German formations, 188th Mountain Division and 237th Infantry Division. They occupied prepared defensive positions in the so-called Ingrid Line behind Rijeka.

In his approach from the south-east, Drapšin simply did a wide pincer movement round 97th Corps, leaving it behind in the Rijeka hinterland, and, in so doing, allowing his own rear to be dangerously exposed. One section of his army outflanked 97th Corps still further to the north, going by a village called Masun, while another did an amphibious attack from the nearest Dalmatian islands to the south across to the Istrian peninsula, thence north-west towards Trieste, unconcerned about the enemy forces behind them. The Germans did not see the danger and failed to act; the Corps headquarters may have been confused, as it had just been transferred from the German army command defending north Italy to that defending

north Jugoslavia. The German troops, though demoralised and dejected, were numerically stronger, with about three defenders on the ground for every two Jugoslav attackers; Slovene historians calculate that in those last days the enemy had about 93.000 fighting men to 4th Army's 61.500. It was not till 7 May that General Kuebler bowed to the inevitable and surrendered with some 16.000 men who were still with him.

IX Corps incidentally was by now so weakened for the final assault that its strength has been reported at only 1.761 fighting men. Yet its forces managed to penetrate the northern side of Trieste and to occupy the countryside to the west as far as Monfalcone and the Isonzo (Soča) River.

In Drapšin's way were now not only the Germans but also the British missions, on a rival and potentially unfriendly side. Besides those accredited to his HQ, various intelligence missions were in Istria, reporting on enemy sea traffic round the coast and on land traffic to Trieste. Just how many is unclear. The late Graham Tustin, then a captain in the Royal Engineers with the SOE mission to 4th Army, believed that there were two LRDG (Long Range Desert Group) patrols, about 22 men of the commando-type SBS (Special Boat Service) or SAS (Special Air Service), plus still some others sent by Land Forces Adriatic, the HQ for British forces in the area.

The last thing the Jugoslavs wanted was to have them prying into their movements as they competed to beat the British into Trieste. So they were all denied freedom of movement – in effect, put under house arrest – including for a time the BLOs with 4th Army itself.

On Drapšin's right flank, however, well into the interior, the British were still loyally supplying the Jugoslav forces. Since the beginning of the year an airstrip had been operating at Krasinec between Rijeka and Zagreb, near Slovenia's border with Croatia. During April Allied aircraft landed on 16 days during the month, the last arrival being by seven aircraft on 26 April. They brought in food, arms and equipment, and clothing (uniforms) and took out over 500 Partizan wounded to hospitals in Italy.

Tustin, recalling their house arrest, wrote in a private autobiography that Gibb then arrived from Slovenia and the mission with 4th Army suggested that he should „go over to sort it all out". So, equipped with a guide and a safe-conduct from Drapšin, Gibb slipped through a minefield that lay in the way, then crossed a stretch of sea to Istria, where he met the local Partizan commander. His initiative obviously brought results, since SOE's base in Bari communicated soon afterwards that all Allied personnel had been withdrawn from Istria. According to Tustin's reckoning, Gibb went on his assignment to Istria on 25 April, two days before a division of Fourth Army crossed over from a Dalmatian island in the southern pincer movement.

Everyone was now making for Trieste. To the west of the city General Jože Borštnar, the IX Corps commander, had reached Monfalcone, effectively blocking the way for General Freyberg. Borštnar kept Freyberg waiting overnight for an appointment and when the two generals did meet their conversation was amicable enough but inconclusive; all of which delayed the New Zealanders' descent on Trieste till the next morning.

Tension arose between the nominal allies during the mopping up operations, for the Germans did not relish the prospect of Jugoslav captivity and did their best to surrender to forces under British command. On 3 May at Opicina above Trieste, where some German units were still holding out, a confused battle took place in which the Jugoslavs opened fire. Their shots are said to have killed one New Zealander and wounded another.

Tension intensified during the days that followed: days of demonstrations, of incidents, of people disappearing, all of which have been amply written about by axe-grinders as well as by historians. Suffice it to say that the Jugoslavs were forced by the Anglo-Americans to evacuate Trieste after 40 days of occupation, retiring to an area to the east and south; an area inhabited by Italians, Slovenes and Croats, but still within the borders of Italy between the two world wars. The British forces on the spot breathed a sigh of relief; most of them wanted nothing more than to enjoy the end of the war and, despite the uneasy quiet, XIII Corps HQ for example soon decided that staff would work in the mornings only and have the afternoons for play and relaxation.

Under the Italian peace treaty that came into force on 15 September 1947 it was stipulated that much of the area being occupied by the Anglo-Americans and by the Jugoslavs would form the Free Territory of Trieste, separate from both Italy and Jugoslavia, and administered by a governor appointed by the United Nations. But it proved impossible, in the climate of the cold war, to reach international agreement on the governor. Consequently Trieste continued to be ruled for nine years by Anglo-American military government, under three successive British commanders, Generals John Harding, Terence Airey and John Winterton. Finally in October 1954 the governments concerned agreed on the return of Trieste to Italy: the city and a narrow strip around it, with minor frontier adjustments, was restored to the rule of Rome and the area already occupied by the Jugoslavs went to Jugoslavia.

Further to the north tension also persisted for years, little noticed by the world, in an area that had already been incorporated in Italy since the previous century: in „Benetija“, the eastern fringe of Friuli where there was a substantial Slovene population. There the local people talked of new pro-Italian „Osovani“ who emerged after the end of the war; individuals whom they had not seen before in the uniform with the green neckerchief, but who claimed the status of resistance fighters. Some of them, it was maintained, had been passive during the hostilities or even in the ranks of collaborationist forces. Before long the cold war set in between East and West, and these Italian ultra-patriots served as nucleus for a so-called Gladio or Stay Behind organisation, to act as a new generation of resistance fighters in the event of attack from the East. While other fighters in the resistance had long been disarmed and sent home, it was convenient for them to claim legitimacy from the existence of Stay Behind structures in other Nato countries. Operating in areas of mixed population, they created an atmosphere of oppression for the local Slovenes and made it clear to them that there must be no threat to *la Patria* or to *Italianità*. The refusal of the Rome government to grant minority rights or to recognise the existence of a non-Italian population in the area was a source of friction for years to come.

20
An Unwelcome Letter

Few people have been handed their death warrant, tore it up and lived to tell the tale. Ivo Božič and Miroslav Krizmančič found themselves in this unusual position at the end of the war. Božič tells how they were sent for by their superiors during the last weeks of hostilities and given a letter of posting to another headquarters. The campaign was moving so quickly in its final stages that it inevitably brought confusion and disorder in its trail, among the victors as well as the vanquished; IX Corps itself was in the last weeks of its existence and when the fighting was over would soon be disbanded. Uncertain where to find the new headquarters, the two made for Trieste, which was the centre of action and events.

Fortunately Božič's old friend Dušan Kveder was now Jugoslav town commandant in Trieste. So they reported to him and asked in the meantime for a fortnight's leave to see at last their families; Božič went to Most na Soči (Santa Lucia to the Italians) in the Soča valley and Krizmančič to a village on the *karst* east of Trieste. By prearrangement, they met on Piazza Unita, the main square of Trieste on the sea front, at two o'clock on the day their leave ended. Krizmančič was ashen faced. He had opened the letter, which was in fact to a secret police address and read approximately: „We are sending you two English spies. Interrogate them, liquidate them, and do it all in maximum secrecy."

Božič says he cannot vouch for the exact text, as the letter was too „hot"' for them to keep, so they tore it up and threw the pieces away. They were on their own and had to decide what to do. Luckily they had not told Kveder about the letter, so they went to him and asked him where they should report. Knowing they were both radio operators, Kveder sent them with a movement order pointing out their qualifications to the military command in Ljubljana. A new armoured formation was in the process of being set up and its headquarters needed skilled radio operators, so they were taken on.

They soon moved with it to the area of Belgrade. There Božič contrived together with Krizmančič to meet Aleš Bebler, whom he had known since 1943 and who was now Jugoslav deputy foreign minister. He recalled to Bebler how their services had been so highly regarded that they had been admitted to membership of the Communist Party, only to be suspended soon afterwards without justification. They complained about this to Bebler, who promised to take the matter up.

Krizmančič for his part submitted a 16-page memorandum or „autobiography", backing up a request for readmission to the Party. It told in detail of his difficult childhood, his call-up into the Italian army and capture by the British, his training by them and despatch on mission to the Primorska, followed by his decision to pass to the Partizans with whom his meritorious service was such as to gain acceptance into the Communist Party, till he and other comrades were suspended by the commissar. Naturally he made no mention of the letter he and Božič had received and torn up.

These efforts by Božič and Krizmančič were of no avail. Neither received a reply. Instead they were both questioned in the autumn, separately, by the secret police about their past. The following February found Božič transferred to the 2nd Armoured Brigade in Skopje, capital of Macedonia in the extreme south-east of Jugoslavia – he was glad to be as far as possible from Slovenia, as he put it. He was kept hanging about, with no real work to do. Then in October 1946 Božič was demobilised, and went to work in the family bakery at Most na Soči.

His troubles were over, but only for a few years. Around 1950, whom should he meet by chance in a local bar but the former political commissar, Viktor Avbelj – Rudi. „How come you are alive?" – or some such phrase – was the man's anything but cheerful greeting. The secret police, now renamed UDBA, were put on to his trail again and he was visited by a certain colonel, who had been a Partizan liaison officer to a British mission. The secret police proposed to him to go to the British Reading Room at Zagreb in Croatia (run by the British Council), where they said one of his old acquaintances, a former British liaison officer with IX Corps, was now working. Božič was to tell the Englishman a sad tale about being unable to obtain a job and wanting to get out to the west; he would then report back to UDBA and provide them with information about clandestine escape routes to the west. Božič refused. UDBA persisted, pointing to his duties as a loyal Jugoslav citizen, accompanied by veiled allusions to his own personal safety. UDBA offered even to draft for Božič a letter asking for help, which he would hand in at the reading room.

Božič thought it over; he smelt a trap, but in the end consented. This was on a Friday. He said he would go to Zagreb on the Monday. There, he conjectured, they would probably have a photographer waiting in the street, ready to snap the „Jugoslav traitor" as he entered the door. Instead, during the weekend Božič and his wife skipped over the frontier to Italy, where they existed as refugees for three years. Then, a family now with a small son and daughter, they emigrated to Canada, where Božič worked for some 20 years at a Ford plant in Toronto and gained Canadian as well as Jugoslav (now Slovene) citizenship. He came back to visit Most na Soči in 1976 and was living there already some years before the collapse of Jugoslavia. Since then he has been living in retirement, a pensioner, but active in promoting the memory of the *padalci*.

* * *

Krizmančič on the other hand did not leave Jugoslavia. He was a lonely man and felt the need to found a family. He had lost his mother at an early age, had no brothers or sisters and, as mentioned, his childhood was one of great poverty. After being parachuted to the Soča valley, he and the other members of his mission had been hidden for a time by a pro-Partizan peasant, Ivan Kovačič. One of the Kovačič daughters was Vladimira, known as Mirica. But in July 1944 the Germans arrested the family and Mirica and a sister were deported to the concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, where Mirica was used as forced labour in a factory. She survived. In fact she was still living, at Sežana near the border with Italy, at the

beginning of the 21st century: with the passage of time, the concentration camp number tattooed on her forearm had not faded.

Repatriated after the war, Mirica was surprised to receive a letter from Krizmančič while he was with the armoured formation near Belgrade, at Pančevo. She had never paid any attention to him when he was hiding with her family; in fact she scarcely remembered what he looked like, though he had then already decided that she would one day be his wife. She replied to the letter, asking for a photograph. A proposal of marriage followed, which she accepted, and they duly wed and had three children. Krizmančič continued with his army career, gaining a commission as an officer. But, his widow related many years later, he had been beaten up – virtually a routine practice – when being interrogated by the secret police at that time at Pančevo. His kidneys in particular had suffered; in after years his health was always delicate and he died a natural death as a retired captain in 1964 at the early age of 45.

It may seem strange that there had apparently been no follow through by the secret police to the order in 1945 for the elimination of Božič and Krizmančič. But, meticulous and merciless as some secret police may be, they are often also inefficient.

* * *

The other members of Krizmančič's group were not so lucky. The fates of Radoslav Semolič, head of the mission, and of Nikolaj Sever can be told in a few words, because so little is known of them. Like the others, both were serving in the Jugoslav army when war ended. The last contact of Semolič with his relations was when he paid an unexpected visit to a cousin, Jela Vuk-Dobrota, in Ljubljana in autumn 1945. In January 1946 she heard through an acquaintance that he was detained in Ljubljana, in the same prison as the former head of the collaborationist police who had been classed as a war criminal. Later she and Semolič's sister both managed to get interviews with Mitja Ribičič of the secret police in Ljubljana, to appeal for his release. He promised to take the matter up. Ribičič was a powerful man who later had a career in public life, serving at one time as Jugoslav prime minister. But their interviews brought no result. The cousin was told by some lower ranking officer that Semolič „had deserted". His fate remains unknown.

Nikolaj Sever, known as Jug – sever means north and jug south – was married during the war to a local girl from a Partizan family, who bore him a daughter in September 1944. She never got to know her father. After the war he was stationed in Vipava, on the way from Nova Gorica to Ljubljana, but nothing was heard of him after summer 1945. The word was deliberately spread around that he had escaped over the frontier.

This was the first mission sent by the British into the territory of what is now Slovenia, in March 1943. Dropped „blind", they had successfully made contact with the Partizans, arranged supply drops and supplied valuable intelligence information to the British in Cairo. The Partizans had received them with enthusiasm. No one then could have foretold how the wind would veer round to the opposite direction.

21.
Private Zdravko Lenščak

Captain John Leonard had thus reverted to Zdravko Lenščak, no longer an officer but demoted to the ranks when he was accepted in January 1945 into the Jugoslav Army of National Liberation. He and the fellow Slovenes in his mission were kept under close observation by the secret police. A file relating to their activities has been preserved in the Slovene government's archives in Ljubljana; it is incomplete and unsatisfactory in that various documents are unsigned and have clearly been copied from originals. The file contains a series of reports at successive intervals of time from an unidentified OZNA representative in the Bela Krajina area of southern Slovenia, ranging over the year between August 1945 and August 1946. They tell an extraordinary story.

One, entitled „Monthly Report of 6.12.45“ – seven months after the end of the war – was headed „Anglo-Americans“. Textual extracts are worth quoting, for they give a typical impression of the mentality of OZNA agents and of what they thought about the Western Allies.

> The Anglo-American military mission, which was maintained with HQ Slovenia during the national liberation war (1943 – 1945), began already before the liberation to spread its intelligence network in our area, particularly Bela Krajina. With the help of money, material, clothing, etc, they (its members) managed to attract for these purposes a considerable number of elements ill-disposed towards the OF (Osvobodilna Fronta or Liberation Front), with whose help they were already in those times informed about everything that interested them. In so far as they could not establish firm enough links, they used for these purposes the members of the English military mission Lenščak Zdravko and Sivec Alojz. Effectively these two men were organisers of a network, which informed the Anglo-Americans about all questions of interest to them; members of the Anglo-American military mission then gradually strengthened and expanded this network. The Anglo-Americans did not leave their bases in Bela Krajina after the liberation, but only changed the manner of maintaining links; we have to a great extent succeeded in discovering the locations of these bases of theirs in the period after the liberation.
>
> The fact that the war was coming to an end gave the Anglo-Americans the occasion to change the manner of their operation, hence for this reason they dismissed (sic!) their exponents Lenščak Zdravko and Sivec Alojz from the mission and in this way made possible the entry of both into the NOV (National Liberation Army). Both of them applied in the month of March (in fact, in October 1944) for admittance and were accepted into NOV, in which they were allocated to the Cankar brigade, 3rd battalion, 2nd company. The Anglo-Americans succeeded in this way in infiltrating their exponents into our ranks, thereby managing to penetrate NOV.

A series of reports submitted periodically over the following months give a purportedly factual picture of the hostile activities of Lenščak and associates along these lines. The two „exponents“ lost no time in organising a spy network for the Anglo-Americans in the Novo Mesto area, using as a base „Lenščak’s aunt Frančiška Lenščak. At the house of this relative of

his, members of the Anglo-American military mission regularly stopped at least once a week until August 1945 and on these occasions they met either Sivec Alojz or Lenščak Zdravko.“ Once, in the aunt’s bedroom, Lenščak handed a large parcel of „sealed letters to the American Major Gudvin“ (US Captain James Goodwin had been a liaison officer with HQ Slovenia).

After noting that Lenščak had married Milena Bucik of Petrova Vas in April or May 1945 (inaccurate again: the wedding was on 5 November 1944) the writer said Lenščak and Sivec were suddenly transferred elsewhere in August 1945 „and we have lost all track of them“. But the illegal contacts continued: in fact a new phase opened. Milena Lenščak simply took over the chief role in place of her husband. The links were now maintained, no longer with the British or American military missions (these had been withdrawn now that the war was over) but with members from Zagreb and Ljubljana of UNRRA (the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, that supplied aid, mostly American, to assist the recovery of war devastated countries of Europe). The only UNRRA official mentioned by name is „Forbes Bernard“ (presumably Bernard Forbes) a „territorial observer“ who came one day from Ljubljana and was closeted for four hours with Milena in her house.

The author then drew a neat diagram of the spy ring – or, more appropriately, the spy web – showing the names of contacts and their places of residence, mostly in surrounding villages. At the head of the drawing is Milena Lenščak née Bucik in Petrova Vas, connected by a line to Bernard Forbes of UNRRA at the bottom; then lines radiate out to the other members, including the aunt Frančiška in Novo Mesto on the right of the page along with the name of another contact in Ljubljana, and four names on the left including Marija Rus in a village called Adlešiči. A teacher, Marija Rus was to play an important part in events that followed and was described, without any evidence, as lover of Alojz Sivec.

Lenščak was soon found again in subsequent reports; he was in Ljubljana. The contacts in the villages came regularly to see Milena in the Novo Mesto area and Milena took to going to Ljubljana about once a fortnight, presumably to report to him. At the same time she was also thought to have another contact there, perhaps Sivec. Then „about 20 days ago“ – this would be in mid-November 1945 – Lenščak suddenly left Slovenia; that was confirmed, or so the OZNA agent thought, by perusal of the letters he wrote to Milena. He had fled to Trieste and must be with the British HQ there. Milena was quoted as saying that the Partizans thought they would get her husband, but he had escaped in time. While Bernard Forbes was mentioned as paying a couple of visits in this period, once to Milena and once to the aunt, the author of the reports wondered how Milena would overcome the problem of maintaining regular contact with her husband.

It appeared to be solved by Marija Rus coming into play. She got herself transferred to a teaching job in Ilirska Bistrica, in an area not far from Trieste that was occupied and administered by the Jugoslavs. Her intention was evidently to establish a line of communication with Lenščak.

But she remained there only a short time. Without warning and without obtaining permission from her superiors, she returned to Bela Krajina, telling people that she had acute appendicitis and needed an operation. Behind this, or so the OZNA author deduced, was the

likelihood that she had failed to make contact with Lenščak and therefore feigned illness in order to come back. In another report the author speculated that she might be acting as „a courier for the Intelligence Service, who carried mail to and from escaped Domobranci“ (collaborationist forces).

Assuming she was a courier, it followed that she would want to get back to the area near Trieste to make further journeys. In those days citizens were not free to travel about Jugoslavia and Jugoslav occupied territory; travel permits were needed, and she did not have one. Reports describe how she telephoned a friend named as Vinkler who worked in the interior ministry in Ljubljana, in the hope that he might procure her one; then on 4 January 1946 she took the 6:45 train to Ljubljana to see him. „Our man“ had taken the same train and „will follow her every step“, says a report dated that day. Unfortunately, Marija Rus had been tipped off that she was being followed and she just spent a few days in Ljubljana then returned home to Bela Krajina. It looked, in any case, as if she had been unsuccessful and the link had been broken.

Milena Lenščak nevertheless was portrayed as still engaged on her spying activities. The OZNA agent came to this conclusion because he had heard that she had been enquiring about names of local members of the Communist Party, the Party youth movement and its women's organisation; she could clearly have no other purpose than to send these details to her husband. Lenščak's mother came from Ljubljana in early February to stay and give her a hand in this task.

The services of an informer or sub-agent, code named P2, were by now being used. P2 reported to the writer of a report dated 15 February that a link with the West had been re-established. It now went through friendly members of a family called Kuret. One of the family was postmaster at Logatec, a town on the pre-war border with Italy, and as postmaster he could circumvent the interception and censorship to which letters sent through the ordinary mail were subject.

The informer now sprang a surprise. The Intelligence Service had reactivated Lenščak for service inside Slovenia. On 23 February, P2 reported, its members collected Lenščak at 3:00 a.m. from his apartment – presumably in the Trieste area, though its location was not specified – and had driven him to Ribnica, in the Dolenjska area of south-central Slovenia. There Lenščak had established a base, and was believed to have a radio receiver and transmitter. His wife was in contact with him and sent him „all the material required for the purpose of anti-people's activity“. P2 claimed to have had this news from none other than Lenščak's father. His report concluded that this network would assuredly be unmasked within the next fortnight and „full success is assured“.

The monthly report dated 2 March 1946 is however less confident. Instead of the expected success, it admits mistakes in surveying the activities of both the Lenščak and another (Roman Catholic) group that were under observation; both had realised they were being followed by the secret police.

After that, the reports are less frequent. Milena's movements continue to be noted down. In early August a comrade from the state security service came by car, independently

of the local OZNA, and told her – this was for certain – to expect her husband home in the autumn.

A few weeks later a report dated 31 August 1946 says Milena had recently spent three days in Ljubljana. What she had done, was not known. But relatives told her that „her husband has been shut up by our authorities“. That was made clear from (interception of) their private mail. Milena's brother too, who was a lieutenant in the army near Belgrade, had promised to enquire about him. And there, inconclusively, this extravagant tale ends; the file holds no more reports.

* * *

OZNA certainly had every reason to be wary of Lenščak. It held a series of black marks against him. He had been a private secretary to a minister in the – to it – traitorous bourgeois government in exile in London. He had boasted of being a British officer, whereas none of his comrades had officer rank, yet at the same time he posed as a Slovene patriot; to a suspicious mind, this was clearly a sign of duplicity. Furthermore, he had deliberately infiltrated the Partizan ranks on the instructions – as OZNA had persuaded itself – of his superiors in the Intelligence Service. It was an uncontested fact, moreover, that his elder brother Dušan was an officer in the collaborationist Domobranci.

What is remarkable about these reports is that they are false. Or rather, their content is false, for they themselves exist and gather dust in the secret police records in the Slovene government archives in Ljubljana. Lenščak was under arrest and probably dead when most of these adventures attributed to him took place. He never escaped to Trieste and of course never returned to the interior of Slovenia with a British radio transmitter. Even Aunt Frančiška in Novo Mesto was fictitious. Lenščak's sister, Anica, who lived to an old age, said in conversation in May 2001 that no such aunt had existed.

What is to be made of these flights of fantasy? On the face of it, the initial supposition is that they were really written and perhaps submitted in good faith by some dunderhead sleuth. Or were they on the other hand deliberately fabricated, to show their author in a favourable light? Was he trying to curry favour with superiors, or was he participating in some internal office intrigue among the secret police?

If deliberately fabricated, the reports might be part of a cover operation to hide what really happened to Lenščak. But that would have required an elaborate and sophisticated effort – the concoction of weeks and months of reports – such as to require more creativity and resources than were usually available to OZNA.

From hints every now and again that pieces of information had been gleaned from members of the family, it is just conceivable that they deliberately gave false news to put unwelcome enquirers off the trail.

The episodes are worth noting of the schoolteacher who got herself a job not far from Trieste and of the postmaster in a town on the old Italian border who let letters through. These could perhaps be explained, as one report itself hinted, as attempts by Domobranci – collaborationists and thus „enemies of the people“ – and their sympathisers who had

remained at home to correspond with those who had fled to the west. Of course Domobranci would not be so ingenuous as to use the normal postal service.

The movements of Milena, interpreted as working a spy network, may have been reported accurately enough. Of course she contacted relations and friends, sought company in the neighbourhood, went to Ljubljana. For, despite the burden of an infant child, a young mother would do everything possible in her anxiety to get news of her husband. She must have been highly distraught. Nothing would be more natural than for her mother-in-law to come from Ljubljana to comfort her.

Similarly there was no reason to doubt the movements of the UNRRA official, whose presence as a foreigner was immediately conspicuous. It was entirely within their brief that as donors UNRRA officials wanted to see how their aid was distributed; they also needed to get information from local contacts about agricultural production, the food situation, and living conditions in their areas.

Last but not least: whatever is made of all this, it was hardly likely that the Intelligence Service would go to the trouble, now that the war was over, of developing contacts in this backstage rural region of Bela Krajina that had little military and economic relevance in the then Jugoslavia.

* * *

Lenščak's fate was sealed on 9 November 1945. He was with his unit at Videm Dobrepolje south-east of Ljubljana, embittered at his treatment yet buoyed up by promises of early demobilisation. On 6 November he wrote a long and affectionate letter to his wife, recalling the anniversary of their wedding and dwelling on their hopes for the future. Three days later a car with purported „English" number plates drove up and escorted him to an unknown destination. It was deliberately put around that he had been abducted by „English" agents and that he had also joined a band of deserters roaming about the neighbourhood. Such reports of lawless bands were fairly frequent at that time in Jugoslavia. The authorities were jumpy about internal security, especially as they were not entirely confident that elections held two days later, on 11 November, would produce the results they wanted.

Enquiries by Milena, by her brother, by other relations and friends all ran up against a blank wall. In 1961 a Ljubljana court officially proclaimed Zdravko Lenščak to be dead, giving somewhat arbitrarily the date of decease as 1 December 1950.

22.
Three Raindrops On A Branch

Alojz Sivec was very much Lenščak's junior when they parachuted from the same plane as Stanko Simčič and Ivo Božič of SOE in July 1943; he was not an officer like Lenščak, but an NCO serving as radio operator for ISLD's Moth mission. The tables turned however after they were admitted into the Jugoslav Army of National Liberation in January 1944. Sivec evidently did not get people's backs up as Lenščak did with his emphasis on being a British officer. For while Lenščak was downgraded to the rank of private soldier, Sivec rose to become commander of a company (even if during the war a company in the much smaller Partizan units was more like a large platoon, they were now being expanded to the more regular size of a peacetime army). In due course he was promoted to take charge of number 1 Company, 3rd Battalion of the Cankar Brigade (where Lenščak was) in 15th Division JANL.

A photograph shows Sivec as a tall, good-looking young man, proudly smiling in his parachutist's overalls after a jump on the training course. Compared to the others, he was a little over their average age; born on 27 December 1912, he was nearly 30, seven years older than Lenščak. Trained as a cobbler, he was one of 12 children from a modest family living at Libušnje in the Soča valley near Kobarid or Caporetto as it is called in Italian.

Called up into the Italian army for the war of 1935/36 against Abyssinia – the Ethiopia of today – Sivec remained in East Africa after the campaign ended. Demobilised, he worked as a taxi driver in the town of Jimma south-west of Addis Ababa, where he was joined by one of his sisters, Milka. Called up again in 1940 before Italy entered the Second World War, he later wrote to his family that he had deserted to the British in Abyssinia. Taken to Egypt, he served for a time with the Jugoslav battalion in the Middle East, then was selected for special service and training along with those who had been captured in the Western Desert. During this period he fell in love with a Slovene girl in Alexandria. It was an affair without a happy end: the girl waited for him and, repatriated after the war, got in contact with his family and sought him in vain. She never married; nor did Sivec. Shortly before dropping into the Primorska, Sivec wrote prophetically to his mother on 7 July 1943 that his life was „like a raindrop on a branch, which can fall at any moment".

After the war ended his Partizan unit was in Bela Krajina and he repeatedly asked for leave as it was ten years since he had seen his family. Another sister, Anica, went to see him for one day in August 1945, but as for him paying a visit back home, that was out of the question. At one time, the reason given was that typhus had broken out and the unit was in quarantine; then, as autumn approached, that no one would be allowed on leave till after the Jugoslav general election of 11 November, 1945. He himself hoped to come about 20 November. Sivec wrote this in his last known letter to his family, dated 23 October. After that he, too, disappeared in that autumn of 1945, half a year after the end of the war.

The story was spread around, as it was for Lenščak, that he had deserted to the British. A secret policeman subsequently called on his mother at her home near Kobarid and told her

she must report it to the authorities if she received any message from him from abroad; presumably this was part of a cover operation by OZNA.

A court in the local town of Tolmin in December 1954 proclaimed him to be dead, giving the presumed date of decease as 31 December 1945.

* * *

Fegec, the Triestino, who served in Slovenia proper and not in the Primorska, was under constant supervision by OZNA from the time he joined the Partizan armed forces. Even their officials conceded his qualities. For example, Captain Alojzij Filipič, from the OZNA Section of 3rd Army, wrote in a report on Fegec's „misdeeds" or „misdemeanours" dated 30 May 1945: „In his tasks he is competent, works a great deal and helps the soldiers in their professional improvement, is disciplined, a good adventurous fighter, politically well grounded, very ambitious, careerist, pretends to be devoted to the National Liberation Movement, conducts himself in a military manner towards superiors."

After peace came, Fegec managed to go to Trieste to visit his mother, while his father and brother came to Ljubljana to see him. He succeeded in drawing his back pay from the British in the form of gold sovereigns, which he gave to his family in Trieste. During that summer after the war his unit was not far from Ljubljana and he was able to rent in the city a room with a bath.

To judge from the OZNA agents, Fegec was a ladies' man, the most important girlfriend being a certain Mira Kobetič of Črnomelj, to whom he was said to be engaged; though OZNA suspected that some of the female contacts were made for the purpose of passing intelligence information. He met Lenščak of course as well as members of the British mission and when in Ljubljana after the war he often saw the painter Božidar Jakac. His private correspondence was simply intercepted and sometimes his letters were appended to agents' reports.

Fegec became increasingly disillusioned during the course of the war, especially as he failed to be given the job that he felt he merited, that is, command of the engineer battalion. Sometimes he was a little unguarded if not foolhardy in his talk. He was quoted as saying that Stalin was a dictator; that the Jugoslavs would be disappointed when the Red Army arrived on Jugoslav soil, for they would see what the Russians were really like; that Britain was the home of democracy. These and other observations were duly transcribed in the agents' reports.

Sometimes the reports became a little weird and wild and do not deserve serious comment. Such as that Fegec had money – he had even built himself a house in Egypt with his pay (as a non-commissioned officer!) in the British forces. Then, that he was a friend of Major Randolph Churchill, the British prime minister's son who served with the Special Air Service, and that the two had attacked Rommel's HQ in the desert.

The latest in a batch of OZNA documents from Slovene government archives was dated 7 November 1945. It was an „interrogation", presumably after being arrested. Fegec was then a second lieutenant with an anti-aircraft artillery unit and said nothing very revealing, beyond

giving the names and details of the other Italo-Slovene *padalci* whom he knew. After that, there was nothing. He disappeared, in the same period as Lenščak.

* * *

Miloš Adamič, born in June 1919, was politically as well as patriotically minded. He had been a friend of Pinko Tomažič, a young Trieste Communist executed by the Fascist regime in a big trial of TIGR supporters and other anti-Fascist Slovenes in 1941; the two used to meet with other opponents of the regime and with TIGR sympathisers in Adamič's village of Škrbina near Komen in the western karst. Adamič's family had a small shop and *gostilna* or tavern, but the father died when he was only ten months old. His mother married as second husband a man named Fakin and bore him a half-sister Tatjana and, in 1928, a half-brother Stojan; the latter, a retired teacher living at Nova Gorica, now owns the family house, number 75 at Škrbina.

Taken prisoner by the British at El Alamein, Adamič was accepted into ISLD and did the usual training. He dropped as radio operator near Čepovan on 18 September 1943 together with Knez as saboteur in the mission believed to have been called Razor that had been despatched with orders to move to the north. Adamič was reported to have the cover name of Dugulin.

After their mishaps – no radio contact with Cairo, and Knez breaking a bone in his leg – Adamič headed north alone, making for Koroška or Carinthia, where he was later reported to be operating a radio with a Partizan unit in the Planina area. Then, when the war had ended, he was briefly in the chief town of Austrian Carinthia, Klagenfurt, and afterwards in Ljubljana. His half-sister Tatjana visited him in July 1945 in Ljubljana; one evening he escorted her to a dance, though he himself did not want to take the floor. The next day – her birthday – they had planned to spend together. Instead he sent her a bunch of flowers and, when she went to the barracks, he said he was not allowed out, though he had not been told why. He expected soon to return home, and asked his sister to take a message to their mother to that effect. But when a villager from Škrbina called at the barracks at the end of July his bed was empty.

In 1958 a court in Nova Gorica proclaimed him to be dead, giving the date of decease as 20 July 1945. For some reason Adamič disappeared several months before his comrades like Lenščak, Sivec and Fegec.

* * *

There is something distressingly similar about the pattern in the lives of these young *padalci*; the same patriotism, enlistment as soon as practical in the ranks of the Partizans, often acceptance into the Communist Party, interrogation and arrest when the war was over, then at a certain point silence. They vanished from sight like pebbles thrown into a pond, like raindrops of rain shaken from a branch. To recount what is known about the others – the list in any case is probably incomplete – would be repetitive and would risk boredom. But boring is not a word to apply to the case of Josip Dolenc.

23.
The Courage Of Conviction

> Ten months have passed since I returned to the homeland. I arrived enthusiastic, prepared to do anything that was required of me. But just at the moment when I should have been giving my major contribution to implementing my ideal I was pushed to one side and condemned to idleness. The Party, to which I have devoted all my strength, has not accepted me. I am looked on with distrust. My letters are probably intercepted. For a long time already I have been without news of my family. By pure chance I learnt that my mother, whom I had not seen for a good five years, died a month ago. Is it possible that my family did not inform me of this? In spite of not being offered any prospects, I contribute to the cause when and where I can. But I have the impression that all my work is considered to be lacking in good faith and sincerity, as if it were just a mask or an attempt to get myself rehabilitated. And all just because – this I positively know – of misinformation given to the staff of IX Corps out of personal hostility by the parachutist radio operator...

Here Josip Dolenc, who wrote this on 5 March 1945, went on to accuse as the source for his troubles one of his fellow *padalci*. It would be misleading and unjust to give the man's name, for the accusation was patently false. But Dolenc was living, and had been living for months, under great strain. His life had gone in a completely different direction from what he expected when he arrived at Čepovan as interpreter to Major Watson in the previous May.

These lines are an excerpt from an autobiographical note of eight pages, from his birth to the time of writing, which Dolenc said he had put to paper at the request of his local political commissar. He was then with the mechanical workshop of HQ Slovenia.

He had not remained Major Watson's interpreter for long, but was soon posted to 31 Division in IX Corps. The move was unexpected, but welcome, as he had always wanted to go to a fighting unit. He was however unarmed. He asked Watson for a weapon, and after a week or two the major – notwithstanding the unfavourable description that Dolenc gave of him – was good enough to send him a sten gun by a courier.

Then after nearly a month with the division came another transfer, again unexpected but this time not so welcome, to HQ Slovenia in Bela Krajina. There Dolenc was put to work in the mechanical workshop, apparently on the menial task of repairing typewriters and radio equipment. It was not what he had come to Slovenia for – he, a Communist with already more years' experience than many of the comrades around him, who had volunteered at the risk of his life to return to his home country when he could have sat out the rest of the war uneventfully and without danger in a prison camp or in the Allied back lines. The months passed; he was still in the workshop and his bitterness increased.

In the previous summer and autumn of 1944 he had written a series of letters to people in authority, in an attempt to call attention to his case. To Boris Kraigher, political commissar of HQ Slovenia, he complained on 1 October that he had not been admitted – it would be more accurate to say readmitted – to the Party. „I willingly accept any job to which I am

assigned, but I think that with my military and political knowledge I would be of much more use somewhere else. That is not just my opinion, but also the opinion of many of my new comrades."

He recalled that when a prisoner of war in Dehra Dun in India three years earlier – „the most difficult days of my life" – he had decided that he must at all costs get back to his homeland; something which, he emphasised, had required great determination and steadfastness on his part. But, as he used to say to himself: „The black and uncertain bread at home of a partizan will taste better than the white and certain bread abroad of a serf." Now that he was back: „Why then, when all obstacles have been overcome, am I deprived of the right and duty to make my contribution according to my possibilities? Why am I not allowed to make up for all the ills suffered?" He asked for an objective enquiry into his case; but evidence about him should not be sought „from people governed by envy, malice or perhaps personal enmity".

„Comrade political commissar! If there are any doubts about what I have said, if there are doubts about my past, I am always ready to answer for every step of mine, anywhere and at any time. I have faith in you and feel sure that you will take an interest in my case."

Dolenc took his Marxism seriously and started the letter by referring with approval to a magazine article Kraigher had written on the selection of comrades for Party cadres in which Kraigher criticised the superficial attitude often adopted in such matters. Altogether Dolenc was a high-minded young man, with an element of the puritan, who disapproved of colleagues chiefly interested in drink, women or money. More than once he emphasised that he willingly sacrificed the – to them – princely pay of a British soldier for the honourable poverty of a Partizan.

Kraigher probably never received this letter. He was only political commissar for a few more days, till 5 October when he was moved to another post. In any case OZNA intercepted the letter; as it presumably had an earlier (and unpublished) one dated 10 August.

The same fate befell a letter Dolenc wrote several weeks later, bearing the date 12 November, to Aleš Bebler, the Slovene political leader whom Dolenc had got to know on arrival at IX Corps. From the letter it is clear that since being in Bela Krajina he had previously had two brief meetings with Bebler. Bebler had listened politely and told him to write to him with details of his case; Dolenc had already done so once, but Bebler had said at their second meeting that he had not received the first letter.

In this second letter Dolenc wrote with pride:

> From early youth I have fought for the rights of my people, for twelve years I have been a Party member, the Fascists persecuted me and beat me up and all my family have suffered because of me. But I do not seek gratitude and I am not aiming at some better post; I only want to go to some fighting unit, where I shall be able to give vent to the hatred I feel for the occupier.

Dolenc enclosed a copy of his earlier letter to Kraigher, which he said had been unanswered. Indeed, he had received not a reply but a visit from some comrade who came to question him; he could not give the comrade's name, because the man did not introduce

himself and bore no sign of rank or identification. This comrade asked him silly and offensive questions, such as whether he was a Slovene and whether his parents were too and did he know how much suffering and sacrifice were required in the national liberation struggle.

„This comrade did not come with the intention of clarifying my case objectively, but with the intention of finding at all costs some material that could be held against me. I realised that he was taking down in his notes only those things that could be used for this purpose." He had taken note for example that Dolenc had at one time gone round villages in the *karst* countryside outside Trieste as a representative for the multinational Singer sewing machine company, but failed to write down that Dolenc used this as a cover for spreading propaganda material and contacting local Party cells.

The questioner had insinuated that Dolenc must know about other more confidential matters, about which he was probably holding back. But, Dolenc emphasised, he had no secrets to hide. As Dolenc repeated to Bebler, the British had been correct in their instructions to the Italo-Slovene parachutists. „It would be mistaken to think that the English made use of us (I have in mind the group of my comrades and myself) for other roles that would be against the interest of our people and against our policy." Dolenc further complained that he had brought with him on arrival by parachute a written attestation that he was already a member of the Jugoslav National Army of Liberation – a document that he, Bebler, had also seen at IX Corps headquarters. Yet in some mysterious way it had soon disappeared.

Though the letter bore the date of 12 November, Dolenc did not despatch it immediately, for he added a postscript dated 24 November to the effect that he had heard that his local Party cell at Opicina near Trieste had already some time before sent HQ Slovenia full information about his activities on behalf of the Party.

Even to local Party workers in Bela Krajina it seemed that there was something strange about the treatment of Dolenc. The secretary of the Party cell with the mechanical workshop, in a letter to an unidentified colonel a week later – dated 3 December – said they had requested information about Dolenc from the Party in Opicina two months before, but a reply had never reached them (despite Dolenc's private information that one had been sent off).

The order to watch Dolenc must have come from somewhere on high, for the secretary of the Party cell – a coal miner by profession called Slavko Ščurk – gave Dolenc a first-class write-up. The secretary made the point that they had got to know Dolenc well during the more than four months that he had been with them.

> We all find him an excellent comrade. He is disciplined and hardworking, self-sacrificing and honest. I, who have been given the particular task of carefully studying and reporting on him, see in him a great deal more than that. He is politically well versed such as are few other comrades in my cell and his grounding in Marxism-Leninism, as also his knowledge of old Party directives, clearly show that his competence must date from a much earlier time. His conduct is not only excellent but is in truth exemplary. He volunteers for various tasks and for duties. With enthusiasm he collaborates in study periods. He is one of the first to read each magazine and each brochure as soon as it is delivered to us. Altogether Comrade Dolenc has all those good qualities of character that distinguish a real Party member. Since the time I have known him I

have made every effort to see that his case is finally cleared up. Personally I have the impression that Comrade Dolenc has fallen victim to an intrigue or something similar.

Dolenc was thus another of those like Fegec who made an excellent impression on the people set to watch them at close quarters. His case was not cleared up however, and he continued to live in this twilight position for the rest of the war. During the brief Jugoslav occupation of Trieste in May – June 1945 the authorities were said by members of his family to have made use of his knowledge of languages by employing him in the military censorship there. Then, after being demobilised in September, he was employed by a firm with an office in central Ljubljana. The family of Ivan Rudolf, under whom Dolenc had worked in Cairo, was living in the town – Rudolf himself was still in Egypt and wisely never returned to Jugoslavia. His son Saša Rudolf, then a child, has recounted how Dolenc used to visit them in late 1945; one such occasion being the feast of Saint Nicholas (*Santa Klaus*) on 6 December, when the children were traditionally given presents. Ten days later, on 16 December, Dolenc was reported to have been taken away under arrest from his lodgings in Ljubljana. This was about a month later than Lenščak and his comrades, though there is no evidence whether this delay has any significance.

Saša Rudolf's mother went to the police to ask what had happened to him, pointing out that the British were their wartime allies. She was told that it was wiser not to make enquiries. Dolenc's relations in Trieste had indirect word that he was still alive, in a prison, in January 1946. After that, nothing.

24.
The Persecutors

Totalitarian regimes have a deep-seated sense of insecurity. It matters little whether they are politically from the left or the right, or personal or military dictatorships. All the „spontaneous“ demonstrations they organise can never provide proof that the majority of the population supports them since citizens are not allowed freedom to express their differing opinions. Those at the top can never be sure of the loyalty of their colleagues; suspicion can become paranoiac when it is a case of one man alone at the top, intent on preserving his power and insuring against treachery by those around him. A strong security force or secret police is needed for protection against all threats: real, imagined or invented.

This may appear obvious, but it is always worth repeating. Outstanding examples in the last century were Hitler and Stalin. The former brought barbarity throughout Europe and disaster to his own people. The latter purged his own country of thousands if not millions of talented and patriotic people in the years before the Second World War. The atmosphere of abjection and terror under Stalin has been vividly conveyed and analysed in Fitzroy Maclean's eyewitness account of the Bukharin trial in his autobiographical *Eastern Approaches*.

Among the leaders of left-wing regimes the feeling of insecurity was enhanced by an almost messianic commitment to a social revolution. They were building a new society. It was social engineering at its most drastic. The goal was nothing less than communism, utopia. For this, the class enemy had first to be eliminated and a dictatorship of the proletariat established. Whether the leaders believed in this or were just intent on maintaining themselves in power, they had to be ruthless. Not only with the visible enemy, the middle and upper classes, but also with the hesitant or weak-willed in their own ranks.

On a lesser scale than in the Soviet Union, George Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia* tells of the fate of some comrades in arms on the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War. It is tempting though not entirely appropriate to make a comparison with the Slovenes’ Freedom Front; one difference was that in Spain the left was already a government that was to lose its war. The Spanish Republican troops, among whom Orwell was serving in their volunteer International Militia along with Communists, Trotskyists, Anarchists and young idealistic left-wingers from many countries, were giving ground to the Franco forces and desperately needed to maintain a united front. But the Communists, intent on their revolution and determined to win power inside their ranks, ejected the non-Communists cuckoo-like from the nest. Orwell’s battalion commander, a Belgian called Major Georges Kopp, simply disappeared; Bob Smillie, a 22-year-old Scotsman in the ILP (International Labour Party), died in a Valencia jail, others including Orwell himself barely escaped with their life.

The Communist obsession with internal threats to their power continued after the war. Throughout the Eastern European satellite states prominent government or party leaders were accused of treason and put to death. Their show trials, even if now mostly forgotten,

made headlines at the time. A common thread running through them was that the charges were fabricated.

* * *

The Partizans' secret police, OZNA, was as active as any in imagining and inventing threats. But not all threats, in the circumstances under which it originated, were fabricated. Some were only too real. It had to operate under the abnormal conditions of irregular warfare, in territory nominally under enemy occupation. Properly kept files on individuals, methodical investigation and sifting of evidence, regular training courses in intelligence work – all these were at best rudimentary and often impossible. No generally accepted or well-tried legal code was to hand that could serve as basis for arrests and trials of suspects. When the enemy was at the door, suspicion had to be acted on, or ignored at risk; there was no time for seeking confirmation or for weighing up evidence, little opportunity for a solution other than a violent one.

General Vladimir Velebit, Zagreb lawyer and Tito's chief liaison officer with the British, recalled in a magazine interview in March 2002 how Tito asked him in Bosnia during the war to help set up a Partizan judiciary. A major difficulty was that, in a mobile guerrilla movement where territory could at any time change hands, it was impossible to confine guilty people in prisons. „Since we did not have a stable territory", he said, „we were unable to give prison sentences". When conditions were difficult, there was little alternative between a death sentence and release from custody. The whole system had to start from scratch.

It was easier to set up a system for administering Partizan justice when a sizeable territory had been liberated, as at HQ Slovenia; more difficult at IX Corps. None the less, the Corps headquarters comprised a *sodni odsek* or legal department and trials were held such as that of Ranzinger.

The security services also had to start from scratch. They were an emanation of a resistance movement that did not exist before the war and of a Communist Party that did exist, but secretly and underground. General Ambrožič, former commander of IX Corps, tried to put their activities into perspective in an interview with the Ljubljana newspaper *Delo* on 9 May 1998. He admitted that many wrongful acts had been committed. „But", he pointed out, „we Partizans were completely without legal protection and at the beginning of the war we acted also outside a legal framework. We were fighting against the strongest army in the world and against the most powerful intelligence service, the Gestapo. And help was given to these by the Domobranci (the Slovene collaborationist forces), who killed Partizans on a large scale. They alone killed eleven thousand Partizans." The Germans, it should be remembered, never looked on the Partizans as a legitimate enemy; for them, they were bandits, outside the law.

The lack of a legal system, with the resultant rough and ready administration of justice – or, some would doubtless say, injustice – affected resistance movements in all occupied Europe, not just Jugoslavia. To take just one example: from neighbouring Italy. In Carnia, the mountainous area to the west of IX Corps' zone of operations, active revolt was first stirred up

in spring 1944 by Mirko Arko, a 22-year-old Slovene and NCO from the seaplane section of the old Royal Yugoslav Navy. A dogmatic Marxist at heart, he had been taken prisoner by the Italians but escaped from Padua after the Italian surrender and made his way to these remote mountains north-west of Udine. Here Mirko, as he was known, organised an armed band of Garibaldini that during summer 1944 attacked outposts of the Germans and, when they arrived later, the Cossacks. But the local population of mountaineers was too far from events to be politically motivated and was lukewarm if not passive towards the resistance. Soon the enemy started to react, fiercely. The Italian Partizans were pushed on the defensive. Quarrels broke out among their leaders. Mirko, seeing that his tactics of all out resistance were not followed, resigned his command of a guerrilla brigade. He became seriously ill with tuberculosis and retired with his Italian girlfriend, Katia, to sit out the winter in a hideout near the top of a mountain. Meanwhile a guerrilla „court“ had met in the autumn and passed a death sentence on him, without however informing him. On 12 April 1945, less than a month before the end of the war, the sentence was carried out; two Garibaldini went up to the hideout and shot dead both Mirko and Katia, pushing their bodies out to roll down the snow. That of Mirko was only found in late July 1946. This incident, though it concerned a Slovene, was one with which OZNA had nothing to do; it is mentioned as an occurrence common enough among resistance movements.

OZNA was established in Jugoslavia by decree on 13 May 1944. It unified and brought under central control the local intelligence and counter-espionage networks already existing in the different territories of the country since early in the war. It had the normal departments that one would expect in a secret service: active intelligence gathering (first department), counter-intelligence and security (second department), counter-intelligence and security in the armed forces (third department), statistical and technical services (fourth department), etc.

The Soviet military mission to the Partizans had arrived at Tito’s HQ in Bosnia the previous February, and among them were officers of the NKVD, the Russian security service; notably Colonel Nikolai Timofeyev, who helped to organise OZNA along the Soviet model. Faith in the Soviet Union among many Jugoslav Party cadres was at that time blind; they had been taught to believe that Moscow and only Moscow was the true friend of the Jugoslav peoples, prepared to help them set up a socialist state in which man did not exploit man; while the aid offered by the West was a poisoned bait, to lure them into the trap of submission to profiteering capitalism – submission, perhaps, even in the literal sense of military occupation. It was not to be wondered at that Kardelj condemned the British loan in lire offered through Lenščak.

As months passed, more than one apparent telltale sign of Western intentions appeared on the horizon. Churchill when he met Tito in Naples in August 1944 had adumbrated the possibility of an Allied landing in the upper Adriatic. In the autumn the British won reluctant Partizan permission to land a force of mountain artillery and commandos – Floydforce – at Dubrovnik in the lower Adriatic; it was small, but who could tell that it would not be spearhead for something larger later? Floydforce had to be withdrawn, just when the local British

commander thought that it could be usefully deployed further north, towards Hercegovina. There were a number of small incidents and misunderstandings, including the arrival at Split of a Royal Naval cruiser, HMS Delhi, without warning. But, most ominous, a nasty situation blew up in Jugoslavia's southern neighbour, Greece. In early December the British intervened to suppress by force of arms an attempt by the left wing – by the Partizans' allies – to take power in that country: the operation took several weeks. The Partizans were in an altogether stronger position in Jugoslavia, but it was better not to take chances. It followed that members of Allied military missions – though not of course of the Soviet missions – had to be watched carefully.

The first head of OZNA for Jugoslavia was Aleksander Ranković; a big-footed, lumbering Serb, at that time a close confidant of Tito. At the beginning of the war he had been captured and wounded by the Gestapo, but his comrades staged a daring and heroic rescue from a Belgrade hospital. For many years interior minister after the war, Ranković overreached himself in his manipulation of the secret police and in 1966 fell out with Tito. He was removed from office. But he was not – as had been common in Stalin's time among the Soviet satellites – shot or imprisoned, but simply relapsed into obscurity, a non-person.

* * *

It took a few weeks before the decision to set up OZNA could be implemented in Slovenia. Its first head was Ivan Maček – Matija, who returned in June from being with Tito in Bosnia. Jože Brilej – Bolko, later known internationally as a Jugoslav diplomat, was soon afterwards named deputy head.

The problems to be faced were enormous and at times overwhelming. In Slovenia, as elsewhere in occupied Europe, the civilian population had to live; economic life had to continue, which meant that civilians had to have contacts and dealings with whomsoever was ruling them. The Gestapo was skilful at obtaining information through exploitation of civilian contacts: both by blackmailing people whose relatives or loved ones had been arrested and by penetrating the Partizan underground network of sympathisers and agents. A notable example was that of the officer heading the Gestapo unit at the German HQ in Bled, a Captain Helmut Rozumek, who posed as a secret sympathiser with the national movement of liberation. As „evidence" of this, he went so far as to obtain the release of some arrested men and women from prison camps. He thus wormed his way into people's confidence and the information they unwittingly gave him was devastatingly used by the German forces in their operations against the „bandits".

OZNA was defeated in attempts to preserve an intelligence network in the Slovene capital, Ljubljana; Ljuba Dornik Šubelj, in her „biography" of OZNA in Slovenia, says that due to numerous arrests the intelligence gathering link was interrupted from late 1944 till the end of the war, though the Partizans managed to obtain information through other channels, notably through people in touch with the military intelligence of Partizan VII Corps.

There was the problem of deserters, not so much among the older Partizans as among those who had been called up when the Partizans adopted a policy of calling up the able bodied after Italy's surrender. This had been noted by Major Gibbon, who in his account of his journey across Slovenia put the desertion rate at 10 per cent, though his interpreter-guide told him that it was really closer to 20 per cent. For many of the rank and file this was not particularly grave; they went back home to till the land and help their families to survive. Then they would be picked up again or reported back themselves and would perhaps be posted to another unit. Dornik Šubelj mentions people who had deserted as many as three times.

Others cases were much more serious: they were not a question of desertion, but of betrayal. Among those described by Dornik Šubelj, two may be cited: Janez Marn alias Črtomir Mrak, a head of the Crna Roka („Black Hand") anti-Communist hit squads, had been a Partizan. And Karl Kladnik, secretary of the Communist Party in Maribor, second city of Slovenia, was along with his wife and his lover in a group that worked for the Gestapo and betrayed numerous people. They were picked up and interrogated by OZNA and shot in February 1945.

OZNA was, to all intents and purposes, a law unto itself. Its powers ranged from petty personal harassment to putting people to death. A practice mentioned by Dornik Šubelj, in villages where the population was considered to be supporters of the enemy, was to eject families from their houses and confiscate their animals and possessions. Its structure was distinct from that of military formations and local security units (VDV or Vojska Državne Varnosti); its members worked closely with political commissars. Authority to pass and execute death sentences appears to have lasted till well after the war. It is not surprising that errors were made.

In the IX Corps area the head of OZNA was Miro Perc – Maks. The third department – counter-intelligence in the army – was headed by Mirko Zlatnar. Others under him, some of whose names crop up in the archives as signing intelligence reports on Allied missions, were Franc Čopi – Borotin, Marjan Lenarčič – Tomo, Ivan Puntar, Vladimir Gerbec and Sveto Kobal – Florjan.

A report has survived that Zlatnar wrote on 30 October 1944, two months after the department had been formed, in which he complains of slow progress and numerous problems still to be overcome in setting up his network of informers in the various subsidiary units of the corps. His men lacked powers of observation and did not see the wood for the trees. Informers were disguised behind the *kamuflaža* (camouflage) of regular military jobs; one of his men for example was transport officer for his unit. Comrade Tomo – Marjan Lenarčič – had been assigned to cover „the English spy service", while another was covering the Gestapo.

These early inadequacies however were nothing compared to the disaster that overtook the OZNA unit with IX Corps headquarters on 1 April 1945. In the last major enemy offensive, a month before the war ended, the chief Perc and five other OZNA staff were killed and all their records were captured by the Germans; this was the offensive in which Lambie was wounded and taken prisoner.

After its decapitation; however, OZNA's organisation throughout IX Corps still numbered 108 people on 15 April; on 27 April, just before the end of the war, the number had risen to 165. Viktor Avbelj, the corps political commissar, collaborated closely with OZNA.

In Slovenia OZNA appears to have been more ruthless in those post-war years than in the other Jugoslav republics. The parachutists were no exception; anyone suspected of having had links with the West, however innocuous, could be a target for investigation.

Some errors and miscarriages of justice were subsequently admitted by the authorities, who later rehabilitated the accused, posthumously if necessary. OZNA made mistakes in getting rid of people sometimes out of political calculation, sometime out of personal spite, sometimes out of genuine error. These events admittedly took place against the confused background of a world war, compounded by a social, class-based revolution. Impossible to justify today, their errors were difficult to justify then, as were many of the wrongs done by one side to men and women of another.

In short OZNA, or some similar security organisation, had to exist. Its record was no worse than that of similar bodies in various other countries, both then and later. Given the spirit of the times it activities, however reprehensible, were comprehensible.

* * *

An outline of how OZNA in Slovenia looked on the British and the *padalci* is preserved in a long document in the Ljubljana government file. Bearing the reference 504/45 and the heading *Inteligens Servis* (sic), it is unsigned and apparently incomplete, being merely dated *položaj* (in the field), 11 February 1945. It should be remarked, in all fairness, that this was a time when the British military intervention in Greece was fresh in people's minds, and suspicion was if anything stronger than before. The document usefully sums up attitudes towards the British and the ethnic Slovene *padalci*. At the risk of repeating views already expressed in the OZNA reports on Lenščak, here are extracts:

> The most powerful support to the whole activities of the Intelligence Servis in our units are the parachutists, who came to us in the form of allied soldiers, members of allied missions, and who soon after arrival in our land entered the NOV (Army of National Liberation). By nationality they are Slovenes, with homes in the territory of the Primorska, and they all served in the Italian army. As such they were captured by the English army. There the Intelligence Servis chose the best among them and immediately drew them into its work. For this purpose it trained them thoroughly on various courses that were held in Cairo and Haifa. Above all it taught them about intelligence gathering, about radio operating, demolitions, map-reading, weapons, recognition of own and enemy armies, in short about everything required for the successful performance of espionage.
>
> Parachutists began to arrive in the ranks of the NOV from spring 1943 onwards. Due to a lack of comprehension and ingenuousness on the part of our staffs, they were immediately included in the ranks of the NOV, without any kind of attention being devoted to them. In view of the lack of experienced radio operators and demolition experts in our NOV they were all assigned to such jobs. In the units of IX Corps alone we have so far discovered six radio operator-parachutists.

Altogether we have established the presence in our units of twenty parachutists, among whom are nine radio operators, three demolition experts, while regarding seven of them it has not yet at the moment been ascertained where they are to be found. As radio operators they had until a short time ago access to the codes and were in this manner informed about most confidential details. This was particularly evident at the HQ of IX Corps, where most of the radio operator parachutists were. They worked in the same spaces as the girl encoders, they moved around in all the other sections, and besides that they continuously met with members of the mission.

The parachutist-demolition experts went on small patrols without any supervision in territory that was both under (our) control and not, and set up their networks. In one case we carried out arrests and found generally similar links and letter boxes.

Politically, they all made great efforts to be accepted into the KP (Communist Party), on the whole with success. For example, there were four parachutists members of the KPS just among the radio operators at HQ IX Corps. In their work they behave differently; while at IX Corps we ascertained several examples of open sabotage, on the other hand some cases were to be noticed of apparently the most self-sacrificing work. Almost all received English pay till a short time ago.

All these parachutists try to infiltrate our ranks as deeply as possible, they establish the most varied links with our soldiers and officials, who all on the other hand to the last man have maintained completely open links with the Anglo-American missions and informed them about everything.

In this manner the parachutists of the Intelligence Servis represent a valuable intelligence gathering apparatus, which is able to provide continuous information about all events in our units. We can judge their great success in this from the fact that recently all the remaining members of allied missions, who are of Slovene origin, have been applying for admittance into the NOV.

Both those officially still in the service of the allies and those who are not any more have in all their activities tried to form as many acquaintances and links as possible. In setting up acquaintances they make use of small favours, such as cigarettes, wine and the like and at the same time fasten on to the politically less sound elements (various sons of bourgeois and some regular officers). They strengthen and intensify all these links and acquaintances in all ways. In this they use personal contacts, but where this is not possible, regular written links...

Pages follow in the same vein. From a section headed „Among the Civil Population“: the Slovene and foreign agents „use even the slightest chance to make contact with women. They enter into amorous relationships, sometimes even with two, three and also more girls. The tendency can be observed among all to obtain a wife in our country. In such cases they try to get hold of our activists if possible, sometimes also simple peasant girls.“ Lenščak, possibly not only Lenščak, was evidently a source for this passage.

Watson clearly provided inspiration for the following. „It has been observed with all missions that they themselves bring washing to be laundered, that they bring the most varied pieces of clothing to seamstresses, that they go round various work places, etc. In IX Corps we have established that, in the houses of their washerwoman and their seamstress, they have organised letter boxes and meeting places.“

A section deals with the delicate question of relations with the Italian partizans.

> The political activity of the Intelligence Servis comes to expression above all in the frontier districts of Slovenia. That is particularly so in western Slovenia, where there have been hitherto two missions, one with IX Corps and the other with the neighbouring Italian Garibaldi Osoppo division. A powerful centre of the Intelligence Servis on Italian territory has taken over also political initiatives. By exploiting the extreme naiveté of the Italians, they have established firm positions in the leading organs, both political and military.

Accusations are made against British missions with the Italian resistance. They have „made demands that all Italian units should separate themselves from Slovene units and prepare themselves, arms in hand, to occupy all land that Italy obtained in 1919. From the military point of view they preached an appeasing attitude towards the occupier. If necessary, even possible agreements with the occupier. This attitude of theirs extends across the army, the region and towns. It had a strong echo in the Italian units attached to IX Corps.

> After the incorporation of the „Garibaldi“ division into IX Corps a large number of agents departed through Slovene territory to Bari. They behaved most insolently and even spoke contemptuously about our movement. Among those evacuated were two Četniks. The remains of the English mission joined the „Osoppo“ group composed of the most reactionary elements, who had split off from the „Garibaldi“ division. These members of the mission are now on the one hand increasingly aggravating relations with the Slovene units, on the other hand they are, on the basis of not entirely confirmed data, making agreements with the Germans. Also on the northern frontier of Slovenia with the mission to the IV Operational Zone links were discovered with enemy elements. The head of mission Major Lindsey (sic) has maintained contacts with a Czech captain, who was linked to our White Guard...

The report goes on for many more pages, but further quotation seems unnecessary.

25.
An Ending Without An End

Historical events never look the same after half a century. A new generation, naturally, wants to reassess them in the light of current thinking. Particularly, events of the Second World War have been subject to questioning and „revisionism“ by a school of thought that criticises the conduct of the Western Allies and attenuates that of the Axis powers.

When participants die, they take with them a feeling for the spirit of the time that is lost to a new generation, which has to rely on the evidence of documents or contemporary media reports. But not all documents carry the same weight or reliability: some are merely thinking aloud, or proposals left unadopted, or based on information incomplete at the time; and the wheat has somehow to be separated from the chaff. This is a challenge that historians face. In assessing what really counted it is easy for the recently-born historian to err in good faith.

As for Jugoslavia and Slovenia, British policy has been subject to debate or rather to controversy, at times passionate, by revisionists ever since the war. Was Britain right in supporting the Partizans? These pages may unwittingly have given the impression that it was wrong. As the critics argue, there was a legitimate Royal Jugoslav government in exile in London, whose Četniks in the homeland were a legitimate armed force, commanded by a regular staff colonel, later General, Draža Mihailović; a personally honourable if tragic figure. Yet the British government abandoned him.

Though Prime Minister Winston Churchill had a partiality for royalty, the overriding concern in London was to support whomsoever on the continent of Europe was doing most damage to the Axis forces. Dominant was memory of the year 1940 – 41, when Britain stood alone against Nazi Germany. In the popular mind England had been independent since the Norman invasion of 1066; if it were to remain independent, the Axis must be defeated. It followed that military considerations must be uppermost and all allies welcomed, from the difficult De Gaulle to the despotic Stalin.

On this basis – the contribution made to fighting the enemy – London decided to switch military support from Mihailović to the Partizans. Franklin Lindsay suggests in his autobiography, following a conversation with Sir William Deakin – historian, and the first BLO to Tito’s HQ – that this decision was influenced by planning for the forthcoming invasion of Normandy, the Second Front. The British considered it essential for the success of the landing to keep at arm’s length as many enemy divisions as possible that were stationed elsewhere in Europe; the figure of twelve divisions was mentioned. Only Tito in the Balkans could hold down as many. Therefore Churchill proposed support for Tito at the Tehran conference in November 1943 to Roosevelt and Stalin, and they accepted his proposal.

For Jugoslavs, this decision affected above all Serbia, where the Četnik forces at least were numerous even if, fearful of reprisals, they adopted at best a passive policy of wait and see, at worst one of open collaboration. In Slovenia, Major Novak’s resources were puny compared to those of the Partizans which comprised IX and VII Corps, without mentioning the

Fourth Operational Zone and various local detachments. Whatever his real intentions, no meaningful action against the enemy could be expected from him. The only other Slovene force of any size in the latter half of the war, the Domobranci, were under command of the Germans and thus on the side of the enemy.

Despite the political and territorial (over Trieste) dangers that lay ahead, there was no realistic alternative to the British decision to support the Partizans; it was the right decision.

Interesting endorsement has recently come from an authoritative source, whose work undertaken between 1945 and 1947 was veiled in secrecy until 2000. William Mackenzie was assured, when asked to write SOE's history for the British cabinet office, that his book would never be released to the public. A university don, he was not in SOE or connected with its activities, and was thus as impartial an observer as could be found; he was outside the controversy that had already flared up and would rumble on for years. On the Jugoslav decision, his opinion was:

> To the author (i.e. Mackenzie) at least it appears that no other course was open to the British at the time when they decided finally to back Tito alone. Mihailović was a leader, a man of courage and ability, a man of patriotic feeling: but he and those on whom he rested lived in an older world whose passing they could not realise. Effective aid to Mihailović as late as 1943 and 1944 would have led only to more intense and savage civil war, involving the Great Powers in a dispute to which there could be no rational issue.

It should be added that in a story of this kind, it is inevitably the disputes and frictions that attract attention; they were mostly with commissars. At the same time, bonds of comradeship and esteem were formed on a personal level with officers and other ranks. This is clear from the reports of a number of BLOs, also from the way Sergeant Hammond was treated in his illness.

* * *

After the war, most British members of the missions dispersed to their homes, to lead normal lives and pursue their careers. An exception was Major Darewski, killed after his reassignment to the resistance movement in north Italy. Had their dispatch been worthwhile? Concrete achievements in Slovenia had been few, though it could be argued that but for the presence of British (and US) liaison officers with Slovene and Italian Partizans the Western Allies would have been still less prepared to face the Trieste problem than they were.

Mackenzie was sceptical, perhaps controversially so, about the dispatch of BLOs. Referring to Jugoslavia as a whole, he wrote:

> Supplies were not sent in any reasonable proportion to the number of Allied Missions, and it is a little doubtful whether the Missions served any purpose except to give adventurous occupation to a number of very tough young men... But they were observers, not leaders; very few actions were fought which would not have been fought without them, and half a ton of ammunition and explosives would in most areas have been more effective than half a ton of British Liaison Officers.

The Slovene *padalci* on the other hand had been worth more than half a ton to the Partizans, for radio links, for sabotage, and for training unskilled men. But they were soon lost sight of, buried under bigger events that kept high the tension between Jugoslavia and the West.

The Anglo-Americans, using diplomatic pressure and the threat of force, had ejected the Jugoslav army from Trieste after 40 days of occupation. Tito's resentment at this treatment was heightened by the way he felt he had been let down by the Soviet Union, whom he had regarded as his most steadfast ally. It failed to stand by him for fear of provoking a crisis with the West. The Soviet Union gave Tito a further rebuff when, in Austria that summer, it ordered the withdrawal of Partizan units that had penetrated the Soviet Zone. Seeds were sown for future enmity, though no sign of this was allowed at the time to percolate down to lower Party leaderships, in Slovenia or in the other Jugoslav republics. Officially, Moscow was still the „big brother" ally.

Jugoslavia's relations with the British and Americans were becoming trapped in the broader Cold War developing between East and West. Tension with Belgrade reached a high point in August 1946 when the Jugoslavs shot down two American aircraft that had strayed off course on a flight between Italy and Austria.

Then the pendulum began to swing back after the Cominform, to the astonishment of the Western powers, expelled the Jugoslav Communist Party in June 1948. All the underground dissensions and discords came into the open. Moscow broke politically with Belgrade, and Stalin called on „loyal" Jugoslavs to overthrow Tito. Belgrade's links were re-established with Washington – now the dominant power in the West – and with London. Aid was again given: food, economic and military, particularly after a US – Jugoslav agreement was signed on 14 November 1951 for re-equipping and training the Jugoslav armed forces. In March 1953 Jugoslavia gained entry through the back door to the Western security system by signing the Balkan Pact with Greece and Turkey, which were both members of Nato. Then in October 1954 the Trieste question was settled.

In all these events the padalci, just „small fry" to use a phrase of Major Jones, were forgotten by both sides. The pendulum swung high above their heads, though not so high as to prevent most being sucked into its draught.

The memory of their contribution was kept alive among the few survivors, notably Ivo Božič, who personally had felt the draught and escaped in the 1950s to live for some 20 years in Canada; Stanko Simčič, who had a career as an international sleeping car attendant; Cvetko Šuligoj, whose grocer's shop was just inside Italy in Gorizia; – all of SOE – and Ciril Kobal of ISLD (and formerly in TIGR) who worked for the local authority in Koper.

A breakthrough in making the parachutists' existence and exploits known to the Slovene public did not come till years later; with the publication in 1989 of *Angleški obveščevalci – vohuni ali junaki?* (*English Informants – Spies or Heroes?*) by Jože Vidic, an investigative journalist and himself an ex-Partizan. The idea for the book was suggested to him by Božič, who had returned from Canada in 1976. The book sold well.

Tito had died in 1980, and even if the Jugoslav federation was still formally in being, it was visibly crumbling away; conditions, particularly in Slovenia, were becoming more relaxed and, in some republics, disorderly. Two years after the book's publication, in 1991, Slovenia declared its independence. After independence, a campaign for the rehabilitation of the *padalci* gained momentum, particularly from 1994 onwards. In autumn of that year the survivors unveiled plaques to the parachutists at Paljevo in the hills above the Soča valley (on 3 September) and at Škrbina in the western *karst* near Komen (on 30 October). The funds for both were raised by private subscription, at the initiative of the survivors and under the auspices of veterans of the Prekomorske Brigade („Overseas Brigades"); these were forces composed of Jugoslavs in North Africa, many of them Slovenes, which had been formed and equipped mostly by the British as regular units to serve in the Jugoslav Army of National Liberation. Both plaques were put up in the name of the Prekomorske Brigade.

Paljevo, where the plaque is on the wall of a farmhouse, was chosen as being near the place in the forest where the first mission under Semolič landed in March 1943. It contains 20 names, the total of parachutists then known to the sponsors, and lists the survivors as well as the dead: among them are two Britons, Major Neville Darewski, head of the first British manned mission and his wireless operator „Frenk" (Frank Hammond).

The Škrbina plaque is a memorial to the dead. It lists eighteen names; four who fell in battle, two who were killed by Četniks, and twelve of whom „all trace was lost"; a euphemism for murdered. It stands on the wall of the house where Miloš Adamič grew up and which is now owned by his half-brother Stojan Fakin. Though it is not completely accurate, the names represent the sum total of the knowledge about the *padalci* when it was put up.

The campaign for rehabilitation was made easier by the gradual opening up to the public of the files about Allied missions held in the archives of the Slovene government and of the British Public Record Office. The next step was the dispatch of a letter in autumn 1994 by survivors and relatives of members of the Overseas Brigades to Slovenia's Council for Human Rights. This was backed by a letter to President Milan Kučan from the mayors of Nova Gorica and nine other localities in the Primorska. The president replied in January 1995 that he would do all he could to promote their cause and in December of that year Zveza Borcev, the veterans' association, formally admitted the *padalci* – the survivors and, posthumously, the dead – to full membership, at the same time according restoration of their honour and recognition of their patriotism.

In recent years an annual Armistice Day wreath has been laid at the Škrbina memorial each November by the author in the name of British special services veterans from the Special Forces Club, in the presence of the British ambassador. In 2000 Bob Plan, a surviving OSS veteran, donated an additional plaque as a further tribute from American as well as British special forces. Then in March 2003 – 60th anniversary of the Semolič mission's descent – a commemorative ceremony was held at Paljevo; it was organised by the Slovene veterans' association and attended by the British and US ambassadors.

The wheels of bureaucracy turn slowly everywhere and it was not till 1999 that President Kučan announced the award to the parachutists of the Order of Honour for Freedom

of the Republic of Slovenia (Častni Znak Svobode Republike Slovenije). It was a collective decoration, to be kept in the museum at Nova Gorica. Božič had been lobbying for the dead each to be awarded a posthumous individual decoration, but he did not get his way. The president presented the award at a ceremony in Ljubljana on 22 December 1999: Ivo Božič received the award on behalf of them all, while Stanko Simčič replied in their name with a short speech of appreciation.

Immediately beforehand, Kučan had given an award to the Slovene volunteers who entered the mixed Slovene and German-speaking areas of southern Austria after the First World War, in an unsuccessful effort to claim that territory for the nascent state of the southern Slavs. It was another event little spoken of under Communist Jugoslavia. One surviving centenarian veteran was present to receive the award. Then the president turned to the *padalci*, with words which are worth reproducing, as they represented the first recognition by the state for their sacrifice together with an apology for their treatment.

* * *

President Kucan said, after speaking of the volunteers in Austria:

> The silence has been even more marked about the fate and the very existence of the Primorski patriots – Allied parachutists. Till recently Slovene public opinion knew nothing about them. On the other hand these people and their relatives were for many years unjustifiably criminalised in the inner circles and among Partizan fellow combatants. In the years 1943 and 1944 the Allies sent young Primorski Slovenes, mostly by parachute, behind the enemy lines to the Partizans, some too to the Četniks, after thorough training as saboteurs and radio operators, so that they could be informed about conditions in occupied territory, and particularly about the lines of communication used to supply the German army facing the advancing Allies. According to some sources, the number of those who arrived in several groups on Slovene territory was about twenty nine. These young men were driven by the desire to come as quickly as possible to their homeland and to join the fight against a common enemy. Therefore immediately after arriving on Slovene territory they joined Partizan units, in which they used their military training to perform important tasks. Four fell as Partizans.
>
> In the first two years after the war, in the circumstances at that time of ideological conflicts and the political division of the world into blocks, under the conditions of the Cold War, the postwar authorities unjustly suspected them of being English spies. In that atmosphere twelve of them disappeared and remained unaccounted for. Thanks to the efforts of some historians and surviving parachutists and relatives of the missing, also thanks to the association of Slovene veterans and participants in the national liberation war, which made a special statement about this, in recent years the truth has come to light about this tragic event; seen with the eyes of today, this and unfortunately still other similar events have paid a completely unneeded toll of blood to our struggle for freedom and independence in the century now passing and have cast a dark shadow over the clear and valorous acts of the people. I wish and hope that the surviving parachutists and the relatives of those missing and fallen will accept the official decoration as a symbolic apology of the Slovene state for past wrongs and as recognition to the parachutists of their courage and patriotism.

* * *

That, at present, is as far as the story can be taken. Basic questions however remain unanswered. Who ordered the killings? Why? When did they take place and where? Where are the bodies buried?

Of course, it could be argued, killings were the order of the day. War itself is about killing. Then there were all the mass killings outside the framework of conventional warfare. It is a generally accepted figure that the Nazis massacred about 6.000.000 Jews in the Holocaust, together with numerous non-Jews. Terrible revenge was exacted, bitter personal scores were settled, blind murders were carried out; in the East, as the Russians advanced into Germany, and then after the Western Allies handed back their citizens taken prisoner; in the West, inside France (reports speak of 30.000, if not more), in North Italy, in the Trieste area where bodies were thrown into so-called *foibe* or natural sink-holes in the ground; in Slovenia itself at places like Kočevski Rog, which lies in the hills near the southern Slovene town of Kočevje.

Mitja Ribičič, ex-OZNA officer and one time Jugoslav prime minister, has been cited in the Trieste daily *Primorski Dnevnik* as writing that a decision was taken after the war by Tito and the army chiefs to eliminate potential internal enemies at a time when there was a danger of a conflict with the Western Allies. It was, according to Ribičič, a decision taken on purely military grounds. This would conveniently absolve Ribičić's OZNA of responsibility.

Here however it is not a case of mass killings, but of precisely selected victims, many of whom perished months after the end of the war, in fact in that winter of 1945/46 when tension between Jugoslavia and the West was running high. There must have been, either individually or collectively, some written order or directive.

The opinion can be heard among survivors from those days that the elimination of the *padalci* was decided at the Slovene rather than the Jugoslav level. The Slovenes, it is argued, wanted to show their „big brother" ally in Moscow that they were radically putting their house in order – purging it of potentially hostile elements – in the hope of ensuring Soviet backing when the questions of the frontiers around Trieste and in southern Austria came to be settled.

The other Jugoslav republics were not so tough. Ciril Kobal who operated in northern Dalmatia was indeed arrested in October 1945. But after four months confinement he was released. He was in Croatia, not Slovenia. Stanko Simčič believes he owes his life to the fact that he was arrested and interrogated while serving in Zagreb after the war; again, in Croatia, not Slovenia. In Serbia, too, the secret police appear to have been less severe, at least in this respect. Obviously potential „enemies of the people" such as General Dušan Simović, the royalist premier in April 1941, were allowed to live peacefully in Belgrade after the war, provided of course that they kept their mouths shut.

There remains, however, a minor mystery within the mystery. Venceslav Ferjančič, it will be recalled, was one of the three who dropped to Četniks. He lived through the last part of the war in hiding – in Slovenia. He gave himself up afterwards, and was arrested and imprisoned in Ljubljana. Statements made by him to Slovene OZNA survive, dated May 1945. After several months' imprisonment Ferjančič was called before two senior OZNA officers,

inexplicably released, and was able to emigrate to Argentina in late 1948. While his comrades who had been on the side of the Partizans were eliminated, Ferjančič who had been with the Četnik enemy was allowed to go free. Why?

The facts about when and where the parachutists were „liquidated“, to use a phrase of that time, thus remain a matter of conjecture. Many files have probably been destroyed; others may lie in Belgrade and thus for years were inaccessible. Even if the facts become known, there would be little purpose at this point in time, half a century later, in staging court prosecutions; old wounds would merely be reopened. But this does not mean, to quote an old saying, that sleeping dogs should be left to lie. The families of the victims have the right to know the details about them including not least the place of disposal of their bodies (possibly Kočevski Rog?); but their right remains unsatisfied. The Slovene state has done its best, in granting an award and making an apology; it cannot provide more than a provisional ending to a tragedy whose solution, as far as can be seen, has no end.

* * *

In postscript, it is worth recording that in 2004 – 60 years later – new facts came to light about the fate of Clowder mission's Major Alfgar Hesketh Prichard. As mentioned earlier, Clowder’s sights were set not on Slovenia but on Austria. After spending some time with IX Corps, Prichard had moved up to the Fourth Operational Zone, the JANL command in north-east Slovenia near the Austrian border.

Prichard, who went under the battle name of Major Cahusac, was not a popular figure among the Partizans there. They recognised his personal courage and skill as a shot, but found him aloof and more difficult to get on with than other British liaison officers. He was driven by his determination to get into action, to cross the Drava river and to raise resistance among supposedly anti-Nazi Austrians. Wilkinson, in his autobiography, writes of Prichard’s „obsessive single-mindedness“. He pestered the Partizan leadership until he obtained their consent to enter Austria in October 1944 with a patrol of about eighty Partizans under a young but battle-experienced commander, Jože Ulčar – Mirko, designated as his guide and protector.

As already known, the winter was hard and conditions exceptionally difficult on the Saualpen mountain in Austrian Carinthia. Like Darewski, Prichard failed to get any drops. He survived until 3 December, when a last signal was received in which, after reporting continual harassment by the enemy, he said, „This is no life for a gentleman.“

For years after the war the circumstances of his death remained a subject of inconclusive investigation, both locally and in England. Who killed him, foe or friend? Did he die in action or accidentally?

In 2004 the mystery was solved. Ulčar had made his post-war career in the secret police, then called OZNA, later renamed UDBA. In 1947, two years after the war, he himself came under an internal UDBA investigation for an alleged security breach in allowing rumours about Prichard’s death to leak out; he was demobilised into civilian life, and subsequently died. Then in spring 2004 Marijan Linasi, a researcher at the local museum of Slovenj Gradec in eastern

Slovenia, published an article in a Slovene review based on his examination of UDBA documents relating to the investigation. These showed that Ulčar had been ordered to kill Prichard by Franc Leskošek – Luka and by Jože Borštnar. The former, who had first met Prichard together with Wilkinson when visiting IX Corps, was then secretary of the Slovene Communist Party. The latter was then commander of the Operational Zone; it was he who, as commander of IX Corps, in May 1945 had blocked General Freyburg of the New Zealand division for a day at Monfalcone, thus delaying the Eighth Army from entering Trieste at the same time as the JANL. For years there had been speculation that Prichard might have fallen in some way to a Partizan bullet. What was new was that his hosts had ordered his „liquidation" before he ever left for Austria.

Linasi reproduced photocopies of two extracts from UDBA documents of 1947. Ulčar, by then a captain, said in a statement:

> Before departure (for Austria) I received the task at HQ IV Zone from the commander Borštnar (now minister for local communications in the People's Republic of Slovenia) and from comrade Leskošek, who was then secretary of the Central Committee of the Slovene Communist Party (now minister for industry and mines in the People's Republic of Slovenia) to accompany across the river Drava the English Major Cahusac, who had to be liquidated. I myself carried out the task together with another comrade who is now in civilian life.

He performed the „task" on 3 December, the day that Prichard sent his last radio message.

In the other document, an UDBA report dated 27 August 1947, it was written:

> At the end of September or beginning of October (1944) the commander of the IV Operational Zone personally gave the order to Ulčar Jože... on a suitable occasion in Austria to liquidate the English Major Cahusac. Major Cahusac was a member of the English military mission which was with the HQ of the Koruško (Carinthian) group of detachments (one of the IV Zone units) with the formal task of helping the Partizans with arms, but in reality that of organising intelligence work and of setting up some formation of Austrians.

As already seen in the case of Major Watson, the organisation of an independent intelligence-gathering network was something the Partizans were not prepared to accept. Watson was perhaps more diplomatic, and was given a ceremonial farewell dinner and merely expelled. Prichard, an unpopular figure to boot, was on territory that if anything was still more dangerous. He wanted to establish a resistance group of Austrians in an area inhabited by a sizeable Slovene minority; an area that the Slovenes made no secret of wanting to annex to Jugoslavia after the war. A motive for his killing is not hard to find.

Prichard's mission, and his life, were thus doomed from the start. His name may be added to those of the Slovene padalci from the Primorska who never came back.

APPENDIX 1.
How The Parachutists Came Into British Service

Stanislav („Stanko“) Simčič and Cvetko Šuligoj have published a Joint account in *Mladika* magazine of how they came into SOE. Their experience is typical of many of the *padalci*, and an extract from their account is reproduced below.

After they and their comrades were taken prisoner in the Western Desert and interned in camps in Egypt, it was some time before the British understood that these soldiers wearing Italian uniforms were not ethnic Italians but potential combatants on the Allied side. Some like Simčič and Šuligoj escaped from a camp for Italian prisoners near Alexandria and took refuge with a Polish brigade fighting with the Allies – the similarities of the Slav languages enabled them to get on with each other. But the British insisted on them being taken back, to be treated as prisoners of war and put them under guard of a Czech unit under Allied command. Here again they understood each other as fellow Slavs, and in Simčič's phrase, the Czech guard was „little more than symbolic“. Then came Hitler's attack in April 1941 on Jugoslavia. That country's status changed overnight from neutral to allied and the Slovenes were offered entry into a Jugoslav battalion being formed in Egypt.

* * *

By Stanko Simčič and Cvetko Šuligoj:

... In June 1941 150 of them (Slovenes in the Italian army) were given different clothing and taken from the prisoner of war camp in Alexandria (Mustafa Barracks) to Agami army camp, not far from the p.o.w. camps. Waiting for them were officers of the Jugoslav army, several of whom had escaped from the occupier in Jugoslavia, while others had been called up as officers from among the Jugoslavs living in Egypt. They established the so-called First Guard Battalion under the command of Major Zubenica. The Slovenes from the Primorska did not feel much at ease in the battalion, first of all because the language of command was Serbo-Croat, then because the customs and way of behaviour were inherited from the Jugoslav army, which for us were unknown and unacceptable. For example at the first battalion parade Major Zubenica, in front of everyone, struck several times with his swagger stick the soldier Pavel Ristić, who was late in answering the roll call. Ristić was the only private soldier who had escaped from Jugoslavia through Greece and, God knows how, had arrived in Egypt.

Zubenica was immediately replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Dinić. The Slovenes thus saw for the first time how officers behaved in the Jugo-army. Admittedly there was no more beating, but a bad impression remained.

The battalion was organised in four companies together with battalion headquarters. General Mirković was also there; he commanded all the units of Jugoslav forces in the Middle East. Soldiers received pay of 5 Egyptian pounds a month, a sergeant 10 and a lance-sergeant 8. Military training was tough, for everyone had been in the Italian army and was used to Italian combat methods, while now it was necessary to adapt to new methods. The men's morale was at its peak and everything went ahead slowly but in good order. On Sundays and holidays there

was free time and the men were able to go into Alexandria to enjoy themselves. They used to go at first to Slovene sisters of a teaching order, who had a house and a lovely garden. There they sang songs and drank coffee in the company of Slovene women and girls who had come as domestics (known as *aleksandrinke*) in order to help their impoverished families back in Primorska. Later, more in the town centre, the so-called *Jugoslovanski dom* (Jugoslav House) was opened under the management of expatriate Slovenes. There they were able to sing and also to eat something and dance. In Alexandria the Slovene population was pretty numerous, since for many years women had been coming to work. They performed services like house helps, children's nurses and other simple occupations. Because of the war they had not been able to return home, while the British had interned the men as Italian citizens and then, after the establishment of the Jugo-army, had mostly let them free. Here friendships and acquaintances were made, and also relations met up with each other, even mothers with sons and sisters with brothers, without mentioning cousins and neighbours. In short, Slovenes get together everywhere; and they like to meet and enjoy themselves as far as possible.

In December 1941 all the officers in the battalion were called to General Mirković's headquarters. They were offered the possibility of going to Jugoslavia and joining the guerrillas. Of all the officers only two volunteered, namely Second Lieutenant Boris Simović, son of the prime minister who headed the Belgrade *coup d'état* in 1941, while the other was a Montenegrin called Kankaraz. The others all refused to go, at least voluntarily. Then General Mirković made the same appeal to all non-commissioned officers. Almost all the NCOs came forward, but since there were too many of them, only several were chosen. Among the Slovenes were Stanislav Simčič, Cvetko Šuligoj, Valter Gorjanc, Marjan Fegec, Ivo Božić, Alojz Černigoj, Zdravko Piško and Anton Zupan, who however was not from Primorska but Gorenjska and a former legionnaire.

At the end of December 1941 all these volunteers were taken to the high command in Cairo and from there to the town of Haifa in the then Palestine. At the railway station they were met by (British) officers who gave them a rather frosty welcome, for they thought that only officers would be coming whereas in fact they were meeting sergeants and corporals. They were conducted to Mount Carmel above Haifa, where there was an enclosed piece of land for a „Special Training Centre". They were accommodated in huts and allotted beds with bed linen and everything necessary for their stay. Training soon began. The men were divided into two groups. One trained in wireless telegraphy, the other in guerrilla expertise. At times they changed, so that each of them had some knowledge of everything; of course each group had more training in its own speciality. The course was to last some three months, after which they would begin to be sent to occupied Jugoslavia to support the guerrillas there (at that time the only ones known about were the Četniks of Colonel Mihailović).

Since the w/t group played around a lot with their sets, Ivo Božič succeeded in tuning in to broadcasts from a station called *Slobodna Jugoslavija* (Free Jugoslavia). Thus they found out that other forces were fighting in Jugoslavia besides the Četniks; and what is more, that the Četniks were not fighting at all, but were dickering about in all possible ways and were even fighting against Partizans (as they were called).

Understandably, this gave rise to alarm and mistrust among the men. The Slovenes (as always and everywhere) had their own circle, to which others were not admitted. They listened eagerly to these broadcasts from Tbilisi and got to know a lot of things. They were clever enough to keep these to themselves and to behave accordingly.

As a matter of fact, after three months some people started to go away. They just disappeared without any farewells or fuss. It was known that they had gone because their beds remained empty, also equipment and underclothes and part of their uniforms remained behind. Nobody asked for these things and they remained where they were till the cleaners put them away somewhere. It was mostly Serbs and Montenegrins who left.

In spring 1942 the Slovenes (Simčič, Šuligoj, Fegec, Gorjanc, Božič and Černigoj) were taken from Haifa to Egypt, to the Cairo suburb of Meadi. There they were lodged in a villa belonging to a German, a doctor, who had been interned. They continued there with their training, particularly the radio operators. For them the training was very intensive, for the others a little less so, as they did not need a special training ground; instead there was just climbing up the Giza pyramids (mostly Cheops), which required nine minutes to go up and only six to come down.

In Cairo there was a Jugoslav club, managed mostly by expatriate Slovenes. Everyone used to meet there, members of the Slovene colony (mostly Slovene girls in Egypt as domestic servants), Slovene soldiers and also the new arrivals from Haifa. Thus it became known that a Professor Ivan Rudolf ran a course like the one in Haifa (though perhaps a little more modest) for training radio operators and guerrilla fighters. Participants soon got to know each other and struck up friendships. Far from forbidding such links, Professor Rudolf encouraged them and used to invite the „Haifa-ites“ to his apartment, so that they formed one big family, although they were officially living some distance away in Meadi. Some of these went off to Suez on a parachute course. But in Cairo it was at no time forbidden to socialise.

Soon the month of March 1943 came. A British officer arrived in Meadi, a Captain Deakin, who took over command of the men. Already at the beginning of the month he picked out Stanislav Simčič and Ivo Božič and after brief preparation went off with them to the island of Malta. The object of the trip was for the two to leave in a submarine for Istria, where they would disembark and begin to organise resistance groups among the local population against the Italians. The two opposed this, saying there was no chance of success, since in a few days they would fall into the hands of Italians or of Partizans. It seems that Deakin and the English came to the same conclusion, with the result that the two were put on board an aircraft and sent back to Cairo. For some time Deakin was certainly not in a good mood, but then later he got over it.

And so time passed, up to July 1943. This time more people were assigned for missions, namely Stanislav Simčič, Ivo Božič, Cvetko Šuligoj, Valter Gorjanc and Alojz Černigoj. They travelled by train from Cairo to Alexandria and from there through El Alamein to Tobruk, where the railway ended. Then by truck to the little town of Derna, where there was a big airfield. There were also stores of equipment, from where material and men were sent to Jugoslavia. They saw there some Slovenes, who packed goods in containers, also many officers of different nationalities and races. In the mess there was also an American lieutenant, who spoke the Croatian language pretty well and talked a lot about going to Croatia, where he would find out who was on the right and who was on the wrong side in the fighting. They warned him to take care not to go unprepared, for the first people he met might kill him, if for no other reason than for his clothes, boots and watch. That same evening he was returned to Egypt.

On 17 July Stanislav Simčič, Ivo Božič, Zdravko Lenščak and Alojz Sivec were detailed for an afternoon departure flight to Slovenia. From the store they drew equipment, pistols, some money and rations. A Liberator aircraft was loaded by ground staff and was prepared for departure. Then the aircraft took off and headed in an unknown direction on this dangerous mission.

It flew high above the sea, then exactly at the appointed hour it released the parachutists above Sentviška Gora, where Partizans were waiting for them with fires lighted. The meeting between the parachutists and Partizans was cordial and hearty, whereas the first „troika“ of parachutists to land in Primorska had arrived unannounced and without any reception (i.e. Krizmančič, Semolič and Sever, in March 1943). Only after several days had the latter got in touch with Partizans and established a link, whereupon they contacted Cairo and only from then began a regular connection that had brought immense aid to the Army of National Liberation.

The present group was received by Dušan Kveder, delegate of the High Command for Slovenia, who had just arrived in Primorska for this purpose and who left soon after the aircraft's arrival, taking with him Lenščak and Sivec.

Simčič and Božič remained in Primorska. Their brief was to establish contact with Cairo and to prepare the ground for the arrival of a British military mission. This task they fulfilled successfully, for in the night of 13 August a group parachuted down, including a British Major Neville Darewski (a Polish Jew), his wireless operator Frank along with Cvetko Šuligoj and Valter Gorjanc. Also this time they had with them a great deal of various equipment, notably radio transmitters and generators. The Italians saw all this, but did not have the necessary forces (or will) to intervene more energetically in a battle....

Personal note added by Simčič:

Like all the others, without exception we were enthusiastic patriots, I could say almost fanatically so, both as anti-fascists and as nationalists. Communism was little known to us, but we were attracted by hearing of a movement of national liberation and we accepted the Communist Party as supreme guide. I must however admit that, if it had not been for the Communists to direct and command, the movement of liberation would have been transformed into a movement without discipline and without any order, as was the case in Spain during the (civil) war.

APPENDIX 2.

British Liaison Officers With IX Corps HQ

(and its predecessor 3rd Alpine Operation Zone)

1. SOE Mission Crayon (originally Livingstone)
   Major Neville Darewski, Royal Army Ordnance Corps. 13 or 14 Aug ‘43 – 7 Jan ‘44.
   Captain David Davies, Royal Artillery. 23? Jan ’44 – 2 July ’44.
   Major A. G. Wood, Royal Engineers. 9 June ’44 – early Sept ’44.
   Captain Hugh Gibb, Royal Artillery. 31 Aug ’44 – 31 Jan or 1 Feb ’45.
   Captain J. C. Lambie, Royal Engineers. 18 or 20 Jan ’44 – 1 Apr ‘45.

2. SOE Mission Clowder (destined for Austria)
   Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Wilkinson, Royal Fusiliers. 23? Jan ’44 – 9 June ‘44.
   Major Alfgar Hesketh Prichard alias Cahusac, Royal Fusiliers. 23? Jan ’44 – 27 Apr ‘44.

3. ISLD (MI6)
   Major Nigel Watson, Mission Bordeaux? 10 May ’44 – 7 Dec ‘44.
   Captain George Craig, Autumn ’44 – Mar? ‘45.
   Major Lyall Smythe, 16 Mar ’45 – Apr? ‘45.
   Captain Pitt of LRDG (Long Range Desert Group), Autumn ‘44.

4. Others
   Major Hedly Vincent alias Tucker (General List), SOE Coolant Mission, temporarily while on way to Italian Partizans. 9 – 21 June ‘44.
   Captain Slattery, A Force. Autumn ‘44.

APPENDIX 3.
Slovene Parachutists sent by SOE, ISLD

1. Disappeared without trace
   - Milo Adamič, b. 1919 Škrbina
   - Milan Bostjančič, b. 1915 Harije
   - Alojz Černigoj, b. 1910 Štomaž
   - Josip Dolenc, b. 1910 Opicina near Trieste
   - Marjan Fegec, b. 1919 Sv. Petar u Šumi
   - Milan Golob, b. 1918 Grahovo ob Bači
   - Zdravko Lenščak, b. 1919 Novo Mesto
   - Radoslav Semolič, b. 1918 Miren
   - Nikolaj Sever. b. 1913 Budanje
   - Alojz Sivec, b. 1912 Libušnje
   - Ivan Volarič, b. 1919 Idrsko

2. Killed
   - Anton Božnar, b. 1909 Polhov Gradec, d.1943, killed by Partizans
   - Bojan Koler, b. 1921 Idrija, d. 1943 Smrečje, killed by Četniks
   - Ivo Paron (Giovanni Paroni), b. 1921 Vipava, d. 1942, Nevesinje, Hercegovina, killed fighting with Četniks

3. Killed on service with JANL
   - Valter Gorjanc, b. 1916 Trieste, d. 1944 Baška Grapa
   - Zvonimir Jelen, b. 1924 Slovenj Gradec, d. 1945 Hinje
   - Andrej Škerjanc, b. 1921 Postojna, d. 1944 Vis

4. Survived
   - Ivan Božič, b. 1920, Most na Soči
   - Venceslav Ferjančič, b. 1919, Idrija
   - Alojz Knez, b. 1918 Marija na Zilji (Austria), d. 1996
   - Ciril Kobal, b. 1920, Ponikve
   - Miroslav Krizmančić, b. 1919 Slope, d. 1964
   - Ivan Mikuž, b. 1922 Črni Vrh, d. 1948
   - Stanislav Simčič, b. 1916, Bilje
   - Alojz Širca, b. 1919 Col, d. 1945
   - Cvetko Šuligoj, b. 1915 Gorizia, d. 2001
   - Franc Vidrih b. 1922 Podraga, d. 1983

The list above cannot claim to be complete. Other names have been mentioned in reports and reminiscences, but their authenticity has not been confirmed.

NOTE ON SOURCES

The main British source for the activities of the British liaison missions in Slovenia and north-east Italy is the Public Record Office at Kew now called The National Archives (PRO). What remains of files relating to SOE have been increasingly opened to the public as years have gone by; they are grouped under the HS heading or, when relating to military activities of British missions, are often to be found under the War Office classification of WO0202. The files of ISLD (M16) remain officially closed, though much about its doings has seeped out, either through the records of other organisations or through the personal recollections of individuals.

On the Slovene side, of cardinal importance are the reports of the OZNA secret police. Much of this material is kept in the archives of the government in Ljubljana under divisions of the general heading AS III (henceforth AS III) and has been made available since 1990.

Among Slovene historians and researchers, pioneering work on the Allied missions to the Jugoslav resistance has been done by Dr Dušan Biber, who has culled a formidable amount of material from domestic and foreign archives. Among his numerous writings he has given an overall account in a long contribution to the review *Borec* (written in 1971 and published in 1991), entitled „Zavezniške in Sovjetske misije ter Obveščevalne službe v NOB“. It is particularly informative about what the Jugoslavs thought the Allies were up to.

The Slovene general public was able to read for the first time about the story of the British trained parachutists in Joze Vidic's *Angleski Obveščevalci – Vohuni ali junaki?* (Mladinska Knjiga, Ljubljana, 1989; henceforth Vidic). Vidic followed the traces of numerous parachutists, including some not covered here. His book contained many details that were then quite unknown.

The subject has been taken further, in greater depth and detail, by Ivo Jevnikar in the Trieste monthly review in the Slovene language *Mladika*. He has published a series of articles, mostly on individual parachutists, in issues that started in 1995.

A number of the parachutists were still alive at the end of the 20th century and they were able to contribute invaluable personal reminiscences. It was also possible to hear the opinions of others involved in these events, such as General Lado Ambrožič, and relatives of dead parachutists.

1. Arrivals

Darewski's instructions, dated 29/7/43, are in TNA (PRO) HS5/885; his report on his mission, in TNA (PRO) W0202/520. As pointed out, his details of the circumstances of his arrival do not accord with the personal recollections of Cvetko Šuligoj and Stanko Simčič.

Reasons for the withdrawal of Partizan units from the Primorska to the interior of Slovenia before Darewski's arrival have been given by Klanjšček in a history of IX corps (Zdravko Klanjšček, *Deveti Korpus*, Ljubljana 1999; henceforth Klanjšček).

Darewski's account of his visit to the Italian general commanding in Gorizia has been supplemented by the recollections of Simčič and others.

2. Two Views From The Basement

Gibbon's report is in TNA (PRO) HS5/915. Hammond's account, in TNA (PRO) W0202/520. Daviess radio messages with base are in TNA (PRO) W0O202/388.

3. Heroes Before Their Time

Numerous accounts in Slovene of TIGR and its activities have been published in recent years. Among them detailed studies have been made by Dr Milica Kacin-Wohinz in works such as *Prvi antifašizem v Evropi*.

Ivo Jevnikar has pointed out that, of the 70.000 – 100.000 who fled Italian oppression, over 10.000 went to Argentina, forming the nucleus of a Slovene community there.

The word *karst* has been borrowed from the German *Karst* to denote the limestone texture of the terrain behind Trieste (and in other areas too). To the Italians it is *il carso*, to the Slovenes *kras*.

The number of about 40 victims from Trieste in the Basovizza *foiba* was mentioned in a letter to *Il Piccolo* newspaper of 29 May 2002 signed by Fabio Mosca, who quoted from *L'Occupazione Jugoslava di Trieste* (*maggio – giugno 1945*) by Ennio Maserati, published by Del Bianco, Udine, 1963. It is evidently an understatement.

4. Bally & Co

Rejec's depositions after the war are reproduced in *Pricevanja o Tigru*, Slovenska Matica, Ljubljana 1995.

Some of Lawrenson's activities are mentioned in TNA (PRO) HS3/198. The doings of Julius Hanau, as well as those of Lawrenson, crop up in M. R. D. Foot, *SOE 1940 – 46*, BBC, London 1984; and in William Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE* (St Ermin's Press, London, 2000; henceforth Mackenzie). A more detailed account of attempts by Hanau and others in MI6 to mount operations against Danube traffic can be found in *Target Danube* by Alexander Glen with Leighton Bowen (The Book Guild, Lewes, 2002). Glen also describes (page 37) how the British imported detonators for explosive devices through the diplomatic bag to their legation in Belgrade in 1940.

The Slovene who said in conversation that information from TIGR might have helped the British to capture Tobruk was Prof. Samo Pahor of Edinost, Trieste.

The minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee of the Central Committee of the Slovene League of Communists on 13 June 1958 that discussed the TIGR question have been reproduced in *Primorski Rodoljub*, organ of the TIGR association, issue number 5 of 2001.

5. Whom To Support?

Material is to be found in TNA (PRO) W0202/158 and HS5/942; also in Vidic, *Mladika* and in recollections by Simčič and Božič.

Gorazd Bajc from Trieste, of the younger generation of Slovene historians, has published a biography of Ivan Marija Čok entitled *Zapletena Razmerja* (Društvo TIGR Primorske, Koper, 2000). He has also made a detailed study of anti-Axis activities by Slovene patriots from the Primorska during the Second World War.

The information about Krek's instructions to Božnar was provided by Ivo Jevnikar.

Saša Rudolf's early reminiscences are in his *Xolotl* (Goriška Mohorjeva Družba, Gorizia, 1996).

6. A Hornet's Nest

Events in Cerkno have been investigated in detail by the historian Boris Mlakar in *Tragedija v Cerknem* (Goriška Mohorjeva Družba, Gorizia, 2000). While focusing on the German attack of January 1944, he also surveys events that led up to it. Information on particular aspects of the „Gestapo affair" is to be found in AS III, from Darewski's report and from his exchange of signals with base in TNA (PRO) W0202/388 and 389).

The Hotel Porezen where Darewski stayed is now (1998) an old people's home.

The Domobranci argument that they were not collaborators with the Germans but really on the side of the Western Allies has been put by, among others, Marijan Eiletz, in *Moje Domobranstvo in Pregnanstvo* (Mohorjeva, Celje, 2000). The attitude of a Primorski Slovene like Engelbert Besednjak who was neither pro-Partizan, nor pro-Axis, nor pro-Četnik has been described by Samo Kristen in *Istrsko vprasanje*, Društvo 2000, Ljubljana, issue 145 – 147.

7. Transmission Troubles

See Vidic; also an unpublished autobiographical memorandum written later by Krizmančič.

8. William In Wonderland

Jones was such an eccentric that he inevitably attracted the attention of anyone who came into contact with him. Comments by Fitzroy Maclean are in *Eastern Approaches* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1945); by William Deakin in The *Embattled Mountain* (Oxford University Press, 1971); by Stephen Clissold in *Whirlwind* (Cresset Press, London, 1949); by Makso Šnuderl in *Dnevnik* (*Diary*) *Vol II* for the period 17/10/43 to 23/3/44. Snuderl also reproduces Kardelj's remarks after returning from the London conference.

Jones's own account was published as *Twelve Months with Tito s Partizans* (Bedford Books, 1946). His letter to the Canadian prime minister is in TNA (PRO) HS5/915.

Darewski gives his side of the picture in his report TNA (PRO) W0202/296 – essentially a repetition of W0202/520, but the passages relating to Cerkno are better preserved – and in his signals exchanges with base TNA (PRO) W0202/388, /389. His experiences with the Italian resistance are described sympathetically in *Le Missioni Alleate e le Formazioni dei PartigianiAutonomi nella Resistenza Piemontese* (L' Arciere, Cuneo, 1980).

9. „Gate-crashers"

Wilkinson recounts his experiences in his wartime autobiography *Foreign Fields* (Tauris Publications, London, 1977). His report on Slovenia is in TNA (PRO) HS5/915 and was published in *Social Revolutionaries and Secret Agents: The Carinthian Slovene Partizans and Britain's Special Operations Executive*, by Thomas Barker, Boulder, 1990. A Slovene translation was published by the magazine *Borec*, issue 11 – 12, 1983.

Davies's report on his mission is in TNA (PRO) W0202/520.

Carnier, in the book quoted in the Bibliography, gives a full account of the Cossacks in Italy.

10. Pride And Shame

Wood's report on his mission is in TNA (PRO) W0202/276.

On the Churchill – Tito meeting in Naples, Clissold wrote in *Whirlwind* that he received Churchill's permission to draw on the British record of the talks.

The story of the McDowell mission to Mihailović is told in Biber's „Failure of a Mission", paper contributed to a conference held at the National Archives, Washington on 11 – 12 July, 1991 and published in *The Secrets War*, edited by George C. Chalou, National Archives and Records Administration, 1992. McDowell, in his final report after his return to Italy, advanced proposals such as that a provisional Jugoslav government should be formed, one third of whose members should be nominated by the Partizans, one third by the Nationalists (Četniks) and one third by the Allies; given the circumstances, this can only be described as castle building on a cloud. Lalich's reminiscences are in *Serb World USA, Vol. XVI*, issues of September and November 1999.

11. The Volunteers

It was a great advantage that four of the *padalci* were living in the 1990s within range of the author and thus available to provide first-hand information: Stanko Simčič, Ivo Božič, Cvetko Šuligoj and Ciril Kobal. Their total number is difficult to ascertain: Ivo Jevnikar has calculated that there were at least 27.

Numerous details, particularly about the other volunteers, are to be found in Vidic and *Mladika*.

TNA (PRO) HS5/942 contains exchanges in 1942/43 between SOE Cairo and London about prospects of infiltrating agents into Slovenia.

Corroboration of Simčič's attack on a German troop train can be found in the Jugoslav Army of National Liberation's record of its units' operations, *Zbornik, Boji na Slovenskem 1944 – 45*, Ljubljana, 1995.

12. Captain John Leonard

Kidrič's suspension has been described by Niko Kavčič in *Pot v osamosvojitev*, Samozaložba, Ljubljana, 2001 and by Jera Vodušek Starič in *Prevzem oblasti*, Cankarjeva založba, Ljubljana 1992. Kidrič's difficulties are mentioned by Biber, who also describes in more detail the warnings of Ranković and Kardelj in „Zavesniške in Sovjetske misije ter Obveščevalne Službe v NOV", *Borec* 1 – 3, 1991. Biber has information that Tito was really behind the loan request, which was for 100 million lire; he wanted money for his GHQ and not just for HQ Slovenia.

Vidic is most useful; also *Mladika*.

Moore's reports and signals about Leonard are in TNA (PRO) W0202/241.

13. The Watson Circuit

The report in *Partizanski Dnevnik* of the farewell dinner to Watson is among the back copies kept at Narodna in Studijska Knjižnica in Trieste.

Watson's earlier career has been referred to by Nigel West in his writings about British intelligence agencies, e.g. *MI5*, Triad Grafton Books, London, 1983. Information about him subsequently comes from various TNA (PRO) files including TNA (PRO) WO202/389, from AS III, and from Josip Dolenc's letter reproduced in *Mladika* issue 8 of 1995.

Magill's message to Gibb is in TNA(PRO) W0202/389.

The conversation with General Ambrožič took place on 26 June 1998.

14. Carinthia's James Bond

Insights into Knez's character and his activities are given in: *Mladika*, especially the record of his questioning by the Partizan authorities in issues 9 and 10 of 1998 and 2 – 3 of 1999; Vidic; private information from Tatjana, widow of Albert Rejec, and from Knez's sister-in-law; and from a conversation between Ivo Jevnikar and Knez's widow in *Mladika* issue 23, 1999.

Prof. Tone Ferenc has made a detailed investigation into TIGR 's activities in Austria (and also in Italy) in „Akcije organizacije TIGR v Avstriji in Italiji spomladi 1940", *Borec*, Ljubljana, 1977. He personally interviewed Knez in Austria in October 1977.

15. The Crunch

Biber has analysed the deterioration in relations with British (and US) missions. AS III contains information on arrests and interrogations of individuals; *Mladika* also reproduces some of their contents. The British mission's reactions are given in TNA (PRO) WO202/387.

Lindsay's opinion of Avbelj is in his *Beacons in the Night*, Stanford University Press, 1993.

Regarding restrictions on BLOs: the author was free to move where and when he wished while BLO with Partizan II Corps in Montenegro and Hercegovina in autumn/winter 1944; he got hold of a pair of skis, and no one tried to accompany him on day excursions in the mountains. In early 1945, with V Corps in Bosnia he was free to move, but accompanied or followed by an escort, officially for personal protection. The Slovenes were more severe in their attitude towards the Western Allies than the authorities in the other Jugoslav republics.

Knez's escapades near Villach at the end of the war are described by a local Austrian historian, Mirko Hofer, quoted in *Mladika* 2 – 3, 1999.

16. Always Number Two

Moore's protest to HQ Slovenia was written in the field in the form of a typewritten letter, with corrections; a copy is held in AS III. Other material from Moore, also from Gibb and Pears, is in TNA (PRO) WO202/276.

The Slovene figures for the RAF drops are given by Žganjar in *Slovenski Partizani in Zavezniki*.

Ljuba Dornik Šubelj's history of OZNA was published as *Oddelek za zasčito naroda za Slovenijo*, Arhiv Republike Slovenije, Ljubljana, 1999.

Lambie's report is in TNA (PRO) FO371/48823.

17. Chalk And Cheese

Books on the Allied campaign and the Italian resistance are numerous. An attempt to assess the role and contribution of Italians was made by Richard Lamb in *War in Italy – A Brutal Story*, John Murray, London, 1993. Denis Mack Smith commented on the Italians' feelings about the war of liberation in *Italy – A Modern History*, University of Michigan, 1964.

Hedly Vincent's report on his mission is in TNA (PRO) HS6/853, while HS6/851 contains signals from him (including the long one about Garibaldini-Slovene contacts), as well as material from Macpherson and other mentioned BLOs, together with other material about local events.

Branko Babič's autobiography is entitled *Primorska ni klonila*, Založba Lipa and Založništvo Tržaškega Tiska, Koper 1982.

Vanni contributed his views on the Garibaldini-Slovene contacts in *Porzus*, Edizioni della Laguna, Monfalcone, 2000.

For the Slovene view of the fighting, see Klanjšček.

The letter from Ermes to his brother was reproduced by Patrick Martin Smith in *Friuli '44*, which has been published in Italian by Del Bianco, Udine.

18. In The Bag

Lambie's report of 10 March 1945 is in TNA (PRO) W0202/276. After his capture and release he wrote a five page overall report that has found its way into a Foreign Office file at the TNA (PRO) FO 371/48823.

Biber has pointed out that Lambie was wrong in his description of Borštnar, who had been not an officer in the Royal Army but a railwayman.

The last German offensive is described by Klanjšček: the wounding of Lambie and Ribachenko is specifically mentioned by Stanko Petelin in *Osvoboditev Slovenskega primorja*, Nova Gorica, 1965.

Efforts by SOE to find a replacement can be read in TNA (PRO) W0202/309.

19. Trst Or Trieste?

Geoffrey Cox's *The Race for Trieste* was published by Kimber, London, 1977; and subsequently in Italian translation by Editrice Goriziana, Gorizia. For the movements of Jugoslav 4th Army, see Klanjšček.

The experiences of the British in the 4th Army area, including those of Gibb, have been evoked by the late Graham Tustin in an (at the time or writing) unpublished autobiography. Details of the continuing British supplies to the potential Jugoslav enemies of tomorrow are given by Žganjar.

The shabby Italian treatment of the local Slovene population in eastern Friuli after the war is described in several publications, including *Gli Anni Bui della Slavia* by two priests, Don Natale Zuanella and Don Marino Qualizza, Editrice Dom, Cividale, 1996.

20. An Unwelcome Letter

Božič's experiences, besides being described in Vidic and *Mladika*, were the subject of a talk he himself gave at the Special Forces Club in London on 4 October 2001.

Krizmančič's widow Mirica, who died in summer 2001, talked about her husband and his experiences in a conversation in her house in Sežana in 2000.

More is to be found about Semolič and Sever in Vidic.

21. Private Zdravko Lenščak

The series of OZNA reports are in AS III (301-86).

Lenščak's fate is given in Vidic.

22. Three Raindrops On A Branch

Sivec, Fegec and Adamič are all written about by Vidic and *Mladika*. In addition material about Fegec is in AS III.

23. The Courage Of Conviction

For Dolenc's career see Vidic and *Mladika*, which in issues 7 and 8 of 1995 gives the text of his letters. See also AS III (GS NOV in POS, Oby. Oddelek).

Saša Rudolf's recollection of Dolenc is in *Mladika* issue 2 – 3, 1995.

24. The Persecutors

Ljuba Dornik Šubelj's already mentioned *Oddelek za zaščito naroda za Slovenijo* is likely to be the standard work in future.

Macleans *Eastern Approaches* has been referenced above. Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* was published by Martin, Secker & Warburg, London, reprinted by The Folio Society, London, 1970.

General Velebit was interviewed by *Mladina* magazine of Ljubljana. In it Velebit gave interesting details of talks he had on Tito's instructions with the German command in Zagreb during the war. Such talks, though strictly secret, could only make the work of OZNA more difficult in assessing what was legitimate contact with the enemy and what was betrayal.

The story of Mirko is told in greater detail by Pier Arrigo Carnier in *L 'Armata Cosacca in Italia*, Mursia, Milan, 1993.

Tustin in his autobiography mentioned above writes of the hopes of Brigadier George Davies, commanding the local British forces in the Adriatic area, to get Tito's permission to deploy Floydforce subsequently further north towards Mostar. The operation was to be code named Accomplish.

Captain Rozumeks, activities are described by Niko Kavčič in *Pot v osamosvojitev*, Samozaložba, Ljubljana, 2002.

The long OZNA report on the *Intelligence Servis* is in AS III.

As a curiosity, the following remarks were written by the author when on a SOE mission in Bosnia during the war; they are from a report on the local situation, dated 1 April 1945:

Especially in large towns the OZNA is well known to all, and feared by most. The worst characteristic, again a Balkan one, is that it takes action against an individual if he is denounced by another individual. This system of private denunciation soon creates an atmosphere of terror, especially among the majority of city dwellers whose opinions are not as red as their blood.

This state of affairs deadens individual initiative. People are afraid not only to criticise but also to take action on their own initiative. They have to wait for orders from above. This means delay, and it means bureaucracy, which the Partizans say they are fighting.

25. An Ending Without An End

Lindsay's and Mackenzie's books have been referenced above.

The Soviet order to Tito's forces to withdraw from Austria is mentioned by Duncan Wilson, a former British ambassador in Belgrade, in *Tito's Yugoslavia*, Cambridge University Press, 1974.

The US grant of military aid to Jugoslavia in the period 1953 – 55 was witnessed by the author, then living in Belgrade.

Ferjančič's account of his imprisonment and release is given in Vidic.

Later research has shown that, of the twelve listed as missing on the Škrbina memorial, one was not a British trained parachutist, but a Slovene enlisted as aircrew in an Allied air force (RAF?). The presumed number is therefore eleven, as in Appendix 3.

Appendix 1

Simčič and Šuligoj were of course trained by SOE, while the course they mention as run by Rudolf was for M16.

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About Author

After serving with the Rifle Brigade in the Western Desert, where he was wounded at El Alamein, John Earle joined SOE in 1943. Parachuted as a captain into Yugoslavia, he headed missions to Partizans in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia, then was on the Intelligence staff of the British Corps HQ for the Trieste Free Territory in 1945/6.

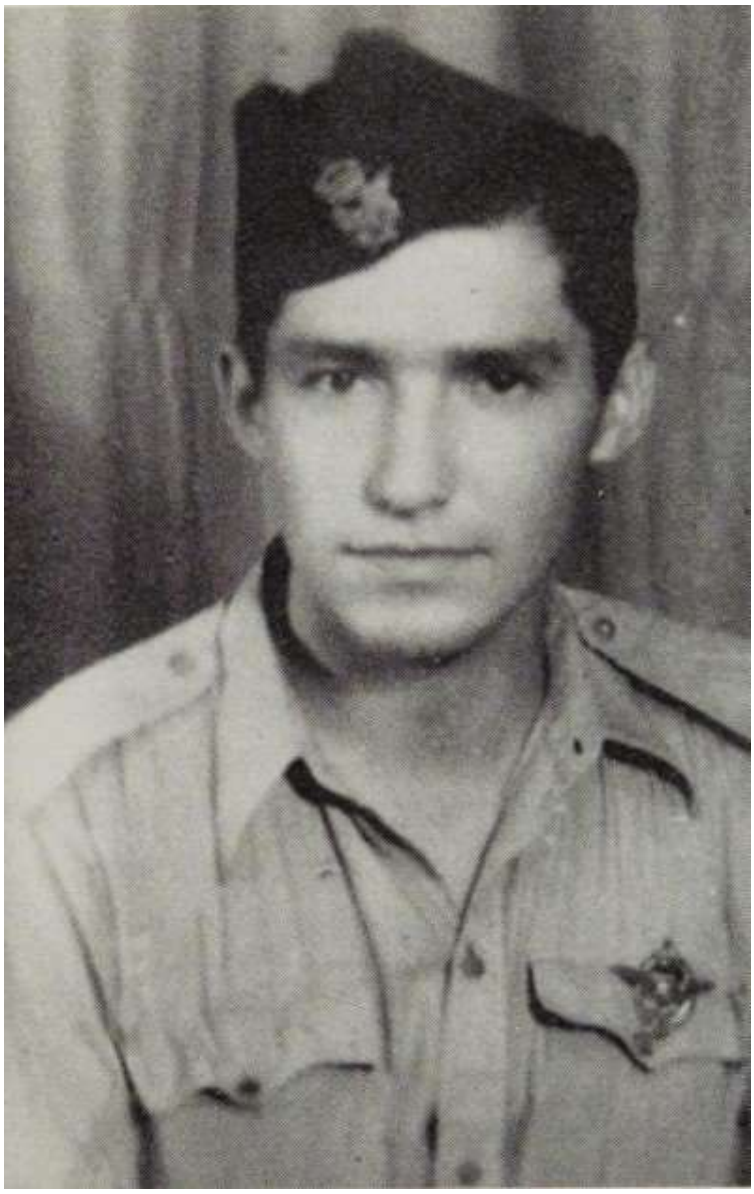
After gaining a BA from Cambridge in 1947, the author had a career in Reuters as a correspondent in Germany, Belgrade and London (Chief Diplomatic Correspondent), and as head of the Rome bureau from 1962 – 67. Thereafter he was a correspondent for The Times in Rome until 1988, when he returned to his wife's family home in Trieste to work as a freelance writer

He has written books about Italy and the Italian Co-operative Movement and contributed to the *Economists* Business Travellers' Guide to Italy and their *Dictionary of Political Biography*.

Photographs

Major Neville Darewski (left) with an Italian Partizan commander in Piedmont.
Photograph courtesy of Prof. Renzo Amedeo.

In wartime council on the island of Vis. (Left to right): Edvard Kardelj, Slovene Communist leader; Marshal Josip Broz – Tito, Partizan commander-in-chief Aleksander Ranković, security chief.



Ivo Božič before leaving for Slovenia.
Photograph courtesy of Ivo Božić.

Stanko Simčič before leaving for Slovenia.
Photograph courtesy of Stanko Simčič.

Slovene parachutists during training in Egypt. Left to right (sitting): Captain Ivan Rudolf, ISLD, in Royal Jugoslav uniform; Lieutenant Desmond Clark, ISLD; unknown; (standing): Alojz Širca; Miro Križmančič; a Polish training instructor; Alojz Sivec: Venceslav Ferjančič; Rado Semolič; Anton Božnar.

Photograph courtesy of Marica Merljak.

Slovene parachutists under British training in the Suez Canal Zone.
Photograph courtesy of Marica Merljak.

The British missions with Partizan IX Corps, autumn 1944. Photograph supplied from Slovene government archives, with these tentative identifications: 1 – Capt Slattery, A Force; 2 & 3 – w/t staff; 4 – Capt Craig, ISLD; 5 – Major Watson; 6 – Capt Gibb.
Photograph courtesy of Slovene government archive AS III 301-86.

Target practice. A British Liaison Officer, believed to be Major Wood, with a Partizan brigade commander. Photograph courtesy of Museum of Modern History, Ljubljana.

An open air meeting at Partizan IX Corps. supplied from Slovene government archives, with tentative identifications (left to right) Major Watson, ISLD; Joža Vilfan, Slovene political leader; Lt Col Ribachenko, Soviet military mission.
Photograph courtesy of Museum of Modern History, Ljubljana.

Major Hedley Vincent of Coolant mission addressing a Partizan rally.
Photograph courtesy of Museum of Modern History, Ljubljana.

Alojz Knez.
Photograph courtesy of heirs of Milan Golob.

Marijan Fegec.
Photograph courtesy of Alessandro Fegez.

Josip Dolenc.
Photograph courtesy of Dolenc family.

General Lado Ambrožič – Novljan, former commander of Partizan IX Corps (right) with the author, May 1998. He was then aged 90. Photograph courtesy of Ivo Jevnikar.

David Lloyd, British Ambassador to Slovenia, speaking during the wreath laying ceremony at the memorial to the parachutists at Škrbina, November 1999.
Photograph courtesy of Alessandro Fegez.

The award by President Kučan of a decoration to the parachutists at the Presidential Palace, Ljubljana, 22 December 1999. From left to right: David Lloyd, British Ambassador to Slovenia; the author; Alessandro Fegez, nephew of Marjian Fegec: (behind) President Kučan; Ivo Božič; (behind) Stanko Simčič; Bob Plan, OSS.
Photograph courtesy of Alessandro Fegez.

Endnotes

[1] The Brigate Osoppo-Friuli or Osoppo-Friuli Brigades were autonomous partisan formations founded in the headquarter of the Archbishop Seminary of Udine on 24 December 1943 by partisan volunteers of mixed ideologies, already active in Carnia and Friuli before the Badoglio Proclamation of 8 September. The partisans in this brigade adhered to various and often conflicting ideologies, including both secularism and Catholicism, as well as socialism and liberalism. The Osoppo aimed to cooperate independently with the communist Garibaldi Brigades and to contribute to the antifascist fight against the occupying German forces. The latter had in fact established the Operational Zone of the Adriatic Littoral, subtracting the whole territory of Friuli-Venezia Giulia from the authority of the Italian Social Republic and establishing an harsh regime of repression and dispossession, availing of the Waffen-SS formations, cossacks and fascist republican forces. This autonomous partisan group was led by Candido Grassi (battle name „Verdi“), Manlio Cencig (battle name „Mario“), two captains of the Royal Italian Army and Don Ascanio De Luca (already chaplain of Alpini in Montenegro and parson of Colugna, Tavagnacco, at the time). Because of the complex political-military situation of the Friulian territory and Julian March, at the middle of opposite nationalisms and secular ethnic and territorial conflicts, the Osoppo Brigades had often conflictual relationships with Garibaldi formations and they were in contrast with Slovenian-Yugoslav partisan forces. The name „Osoppo“ was a symbolic reference with the history of the region during the Italian unification, when in 1848 the city of Osoppo resisted for seven months against the Austrian troops. Osovani - members of the Osoppo movement. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brigate_Osoppo; 12.05.2026.; VestaHR)